TRIPLE EXCLUSIVE: GOD OF WAR 4 | LOST PLANET 3 | CRYSIS 3



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To Hell And Back

GOD OF WAR ASCENSION

First details on Kratos's origin story

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• New characters • New challenges

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Sid Meier

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How to make $3.5million in 30 days

Tim Schafer kickstarts an indie revolution

15 HARDWARE INNOVATIONS That Changed The World

HIGHLIGHTS

■ EPIC MICKEY 2 ■ XCOM ■ LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING ■ ROCK BAND BLITZ
■ PANDORA'S TOWER ■ DUST 514 ■ DRAGON'S DOGMA ■ WASTELAND 2
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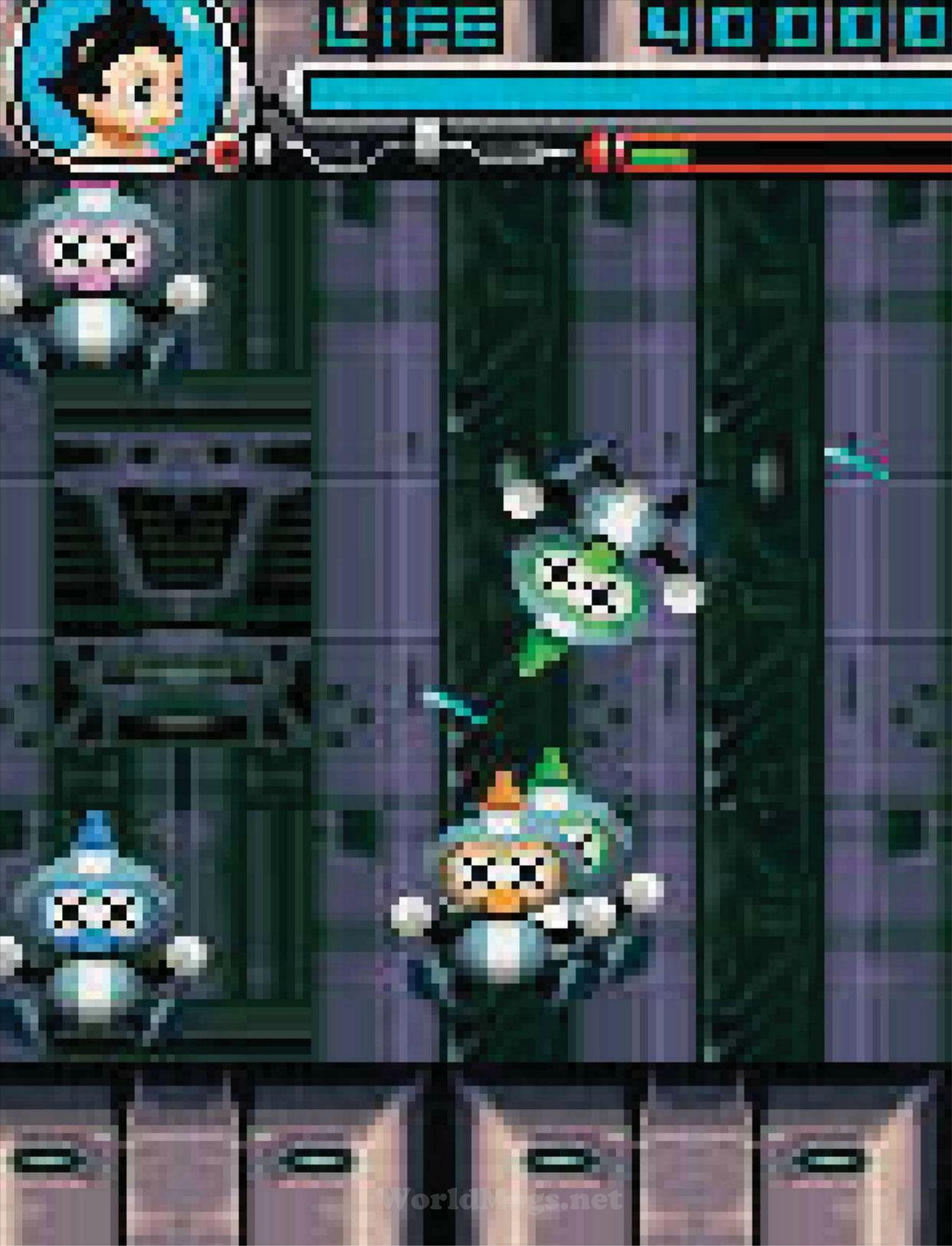
I wouldn't normally call myself a quitter, though after a definite effort to play actual, real-life golf, I've come to the conclusion that I am too old to be choosing to do something I'm so bad at. I am now an old dog, and new tricks – such as actually hitting a ball off a tee – are never going to be learnt. April saw Bournemouth bathed in brilliant sunshine and I live ten minutes away from a golf course so, predictably, I was sat inside playing *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13*. I actually had to move a real set of golf clubs out of the way to do so. I am a quitter.

The experience of playing Mr Woods' latest sat oddly with me. Don't get me wrong; the game is excellent. There's actually little wrong with it and the new mechanics wowed me as they have many others. It was the fact that sponsors, equipment, stat-boosting pin badges, courses, and pretty much anything else can be purchased instead of earned. It really started to grate on me. I can appreciate that it's a choice, and I'm aware that whether others choose to take advantage or not makes no difference to my own experience – I just found that the enjoyment of progression was lost.

It's accessibility taken to the extreme. Any barrier of entry now seems too great, and if the process of removing that barrier is somehow monetised then all the better. I can't decide whether it's a sign of a broadening audience or simple moneyspinning. Whatever the tactic, it's not focused towards gamers like me, and that makes me grumpy.

Enjoy the issue.

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF


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Sackboy hits the road in the most creative racer ever made



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DISCUSS



RETRO





FEATURES



FAVOURITES



Kickstarter Special: An Indie Revolution

→ After the wild success of Tim Schafer's *Double Fine Adventure* (see page 76) crowd funding sites like Kickstarter have suddenly become the most important business model for indie developers in 2012. What's more, they've allowed some truly exciting new projects to be created. With that in mind, we're dedicating the whole of Discuss to the best crowd-funded games currently in development, and the people behind them

DATA STREAM → NVIDIA ESTIMATES MOBILE DEVICE GRAPHICAL POWER WILL OVERTAKE THE XBOX 360 BY 2014

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Your guide to the essential stories

WASTELAND 2

TARGET: $900,000
PROGRESS: $2,933,147 (326%) (plus $107,137 in PayPal donations)
WEB: kck.st/yDcMry

One of the most prominent Kickstarter projects to follow Double Fine's success is Brian Fargo's proposed sequel to his forgotten 1988 RPG *Wasteland* – the spiritual ancestor of *Fallout*, which Fargo also worked on.

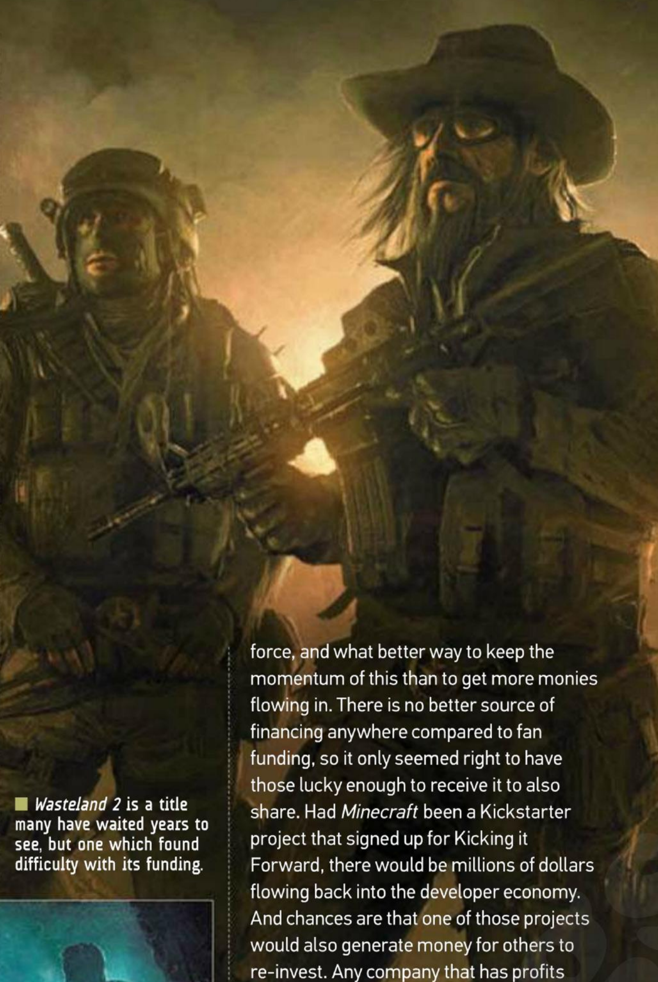
Through a lighthearted video, Fargo hammered home the message that, try as he might, he couldn't get publishers interested in funding a follow-up to *Wasteland* in the way he would want it to be made. Double Fine's Kickstarter, however, got him thinking. "I witnessed the amount of money that Tim Schafer generated in such a short period of time, and then the immediate emails and tweets I received from the fans of *Wasteland*," he reveals to **gamesTM**.

The massive success of Fargo's fundraising effort has, like Schafer, allowed him to expand the project far beyond its original scope, even pulling in high-profile developers. "Every dime extra that comes in makes the game deeper and better," says Fargo. "Having [Obsidian Entertainment's] Chris Avellone come in to help raise the bar is just one example of the things we can do with extra funding. The expectations on this game are quite high."

Beyond *Wasteland 2* itself, Fargo has also become something of a poster boy for the growing relevance of Kickstarter. He believes the movement could certainly shake up developer-publisher relationships. "While I'm not sure it will change the attitudes of publishers yet as they are quite secure in owning the triple-A business, they should be concerned that the most brilliant people would prefer to have a smaller company with more control over the game and over their lives. Publishers might prefer to carve out their own direct relationships with consumers."

So focused is Fargo on the potential of Kickstarter to alter project funding in the future, he's pioneered a scheme called Kicking it Forward, in which he's promised to donate five per cent of the total profits for *Wasteland 2* back into Kickstarter projects of his choice. The aim is to invite future developers to do the same, nourishing the gaming ecosystem on Kickstarter.

"There has been much conversation on how disruptive Kickstarter is to the publishing model, and I wanted to help push it up a notch towards that goal," says Fargo. "Money is always a disruptive force, and what better way to keep the momentum of this than to get more monies flowing in. There is no better source of financing anywhere compared to fan funding, so it only seemed right to have those lucky enough to receive it to also share. Had *Minecraft* been a Kickstarter project that signed up for Kicking it Forward, there would be millions of dollars flowing back into the developer economy. And chances are that one of those projects would also generate money for others to re-invest. Any company that has profits to distribute would be wholly in charge of where that money goes. It is an honour system, just like Kickstarter is."



■ *Wasteland 2* is a title many have waited years to see, but one which found difficulty with its funding.







PINKERTON ROAD

TARGET: $300,000
PROGRESS: $221,705 (74%) with 26 days to go
WEB: kck.st/HejXwb

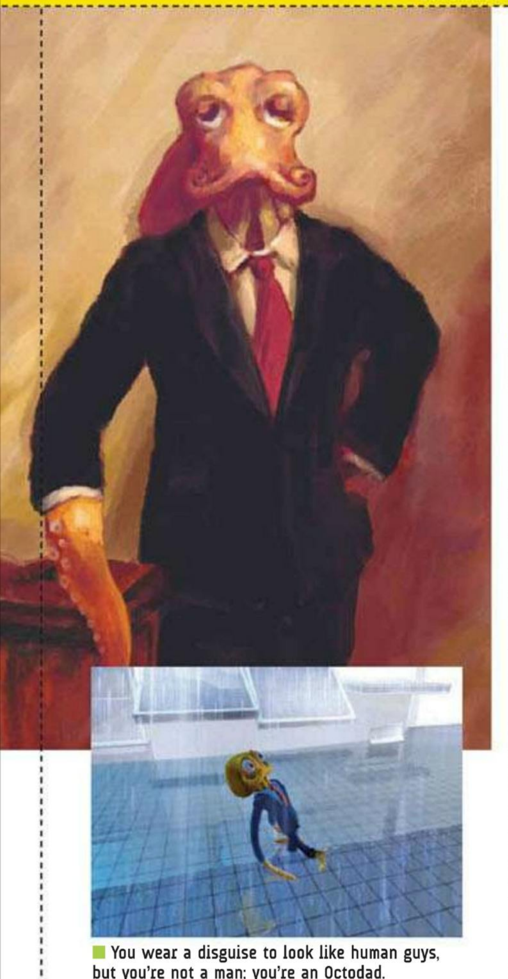
Unlike other Kickstarter projects, *Gabriel Knight* creator Jane Jensen has used crowd sourcing to launch a whole studio rather than a single game. Motivated by publishers' reticence towards adventure games, she wants her Pinkerton Road studio to be heavily driven by player support: "We really wanted the message to be about the studio, not about one game," she says. "We're starting this new studio to do all adventure games and we want you to be a part of it, the way that people used to be loyal to Sierra or LucasArts. That's the relationship we would love to build with our players; that they feel a part of what we're doing as a company and look forward to all our games and we, in turn, get to have a direct connection with them for player insights and beta testing a wide range of products." Jensen has begun the project by offering backers an initial choice between three game concepts, offering a period of time for site members (known as CSG (Community Supported Game) members) to decide which is made first. "Metaphysical thriller" *Moebius* is currently first in line, with a *Gray Matter* sequel and quaint, medieval Cotswolds-set *Anglophile Adventures* both possibilities if the funding target is met.



PETER MOLYNEUX'S NEW WORKPLACE – 22 CANS – RECIEVES 1,000 JOB APPLICATIONS IN JUST A FEW WEEKS







■ You wear a disguise to look like human guys, but you're not a man; you're an Octodad.

OCTODAD 2: DADLIEST CATCH

TARGET: $20,000
PROGRESS: $24,320 (121%)
WEB: kck.st/pbOyEW

An unlikely game spawns an even less likely sequel, the family-fooling octopus squeezing back into the suit for another shot at convincing folk he's human. This is one project that could never have happened without crowd sourcing, and now, with Double Fine having made Kickstarter the face of the funding option, it's exactly the kind of wonderful indie oddity that will hopefully become viable for creative developers. In truth, we're just gutted that we couldn't scrape together the $800 to bag ourselves the tailor-made Octodad outfit offered at the top end of the pledge program.

"Setting up your rewards/reward tiers for your campaign is a bit of a science in and of itself," smiles Young Horses' Phil Tibitoski. "We did a lot of research on campaigns that had both failed and succeeded to find out what to do. Going for the whales who will come in and spend huge amounts of money is great, but the majority of the money you earn through Kickstarter generally comes from the $10-25 reward range. That was the sweet spot."

Still, the inventive studio mirrors the sentiments of other smaller teams, in that meeting funding goals and getting people to take a punt on a relatively unknown quantity is no easy task. "Definitely, larger developers often have or can afford to buy bigger and more popular IP's, things people know about already," says designer Majdi Badri. "*Shadowrun* and *Wasteland* are both in a 'nostalgia love' position and both raised way past their goal. Double Fine always creates great games, so people know what they are getting. With smaller indies like us, people are taking a much larger risk. At first, when I started to see the bigger groups appear, I got a little upset. Kickstarter, I felt, was for small developers. Then I saw that these bigger guys had this 'Kick Forward' button on their pages, which promises to reinvest five per cent of what they earn in other Kickstarter projects. That's amazing!"





■ Captain Kirk never had to deal with saving up enough credits for a new warp drive.

PROJECT CARS

TARGET: N/A **PROGRESS:** N/A
WEB: www.wmdportal.com/projects/cars/

It's fair to say that Slightly Mad Studios is ahead of the curve. Long before Tim Schafer and Double Fine turned Kickstarter into a global trend and developers leapt willfully on the crowd sourcing bandwagon, *Project CARS* – the studio's ambitious multiformat driving sim - was already there. Using its own propriety platform, World Of Mass Development (WMD), the studio is able to offer anyone who pledges benefits beyond Kickstarter's basic reward packages. "The WMD Portal goes a number of steps beyond something like Kickstarter," says Andy Tudor, creative director at Slightly Mad. "It gives players a backstage pass to go behind the scenes and see what goes on, on a day-to-day basis, when making a game."

Community donators can download different builds of the game, attend online meetings and even tweak the game using tools provided, ultimately establishing a unique relationship with the studio. "In essence, when you join a project via the WMD Portal, you're becoming a member of our development team rather than just a 'follower' or 'backer'," claims Tudor. The overwhelming support the studio has garnered is proof positive that crowd sourcing can be widely adopted in more interesting and lucrative forms. "The tagline 'Created By You' fits this ethos perfectly," says Tudor. "We'll eventually end up with a fantastic product that was made collaboratively via discussion with the players and fans rather than the traditional method of hiding away for a couple of years in private development."



■ *Project CARS* is aiming for release by the end of the year, heading to PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and Wii U.





SQUARE ENIX RESERVES AREALMREBORN.NET, RELEASES A POEM HYPING THE RELAUNCH OF *FINAL FANTASY XIV*

STAR COMMAND

TARGET: $20,000
PROGRESS: $36,967 (184%)
WEB: kck.st/pp1WIS

Phasers are set to 'patience' when it comes to Water Balloon Games' *Star Trek* meets *Game Dev Story* sim, *Star Command.* Easily blasting through its modest target several months ago, the game is scheduled to land on iOS and Android systems in late summer.

A perfect marriage of theme and genre has certainly helped to move things along for the indie developer, garnering the support of over 1,000 donators during its pledge period – at a time before each new Kickstarter campaign adorned every corner of the internet. It galvanised the team to expand its initial vision. "This game has now become our religion," stated a press release from the studio shortly after reaching its goal. "Before we wanted to make a game that was really awesome and a kick to play. Now we want to do all that but really make a game that changes the way mobile games are produced and the expectation level of the consumer and press."

How exactly it aims to do this isn't abundantly clear yet, but the team has remained relatively transparent when it comes to community support, even down to a stoic statement detailing exactly how the funding has been spent – namely on iPads, lawyers and poster art. "We have still taken a lot of debt on ourselves (over $50k), and hopefully this can help give insight to other kickstarters and would-be-developers on what to expect."





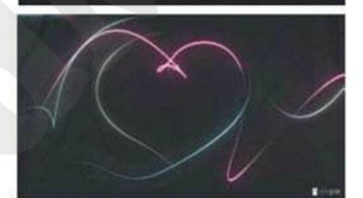
AUDITORIUM DUET

TARGET: $60,000
PROGRESS: $71,061 (118%)
WEB: kck.st/zqeKFs

Freeform puzzle/music artistry was *Auditorium*'s great success, but in order to expand into multiplayer for this beautiful sequel, Cipher Prime would need a big ol' wad of cash. "A successful Kickstarter would match the funds we have and give us the time needed to make a fairly ambitious game," reflects Andrei Marks, one quarter of the four-man studio, "whereas a failed Kickstarter would have forced us to shelve *Auditorium Duet*."

Thankfully, *Duet* hit its target fairly comfortably in the end, but Marks explains how getting funded was no easy ride for such a small team. "It will probably be more useful for big developers. It was very difficult for us to get press. We know that a lot of people have enjoyed our games in the past and would be willing to throw us a few dollars for a Kickstarter. But we also knew that we had no way to find those people and tell them about our Kickstarter, and it was really frustrating. Getting word out is a lot easier the bigger you are."

The hard part's out of the way now though, right? Marks isn't so sure. "Our biggest worry for the future is the effect of having 2,000 people keeping a watchful eye on us as we proceed through the development process," he laughs. "It could be good for us, or it could be pretty stressful. We'll see!"



Auditorium is part puzzler, part synesthesia experience. As the title suggests, this sequel adds a second player to the mix.

TAKEDOWN

TARGET: $200,000 **PROGRESS:** $221,833 (110%) **WEB:** kck.st/zHvzBF

Unlike other highly publicised Kickstarter ventures that ignited the passion of the gaming community, *Takedown* – a tactical shooter project helmed by *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* and *Halo: Reach* lead designer, Christian Allen – struggled to secure its $200,000 target. "Up until about three hours before it closed, we weren't sure we'd reach our target," admits Allen. "After about two weeks it was clear that we had stalled out and that our approach wasn't working. We could have folded up and tried again later with our lessons learned, but we decided to redouble our effort to relaunch our entire presentation in the last week."

It was a make-or-break final push for funding, intensely centered around a grittier video presentation – wherein Allen is tied to a chair and tortured for information – that did much to rectify the muddled splurge of information that came with the initial pitch. With enough donations eventually in place, the next task for Allen and his team at Serellan is to create a proof-of-audience build to shop around other developers and publishers for the additional cash needed to get the game off the ground. "One hope is that it will encourage the publishers to take more risks on projects like these from their internal devs," suggests Allen, "many of whom have pet projects that could easily take off with a little investment from their employers… even if it doesn't have a '4' on the end of the title."



SONY EMPLOYEE CV REVEALS *HEAVENLY SWORD* SEQUEL WAS IN THE WORKS FROM 2008, BUT WAS CANNED





At the time of going to press, *Class Of Heroes II* looks extremely unlikely to reach its Kickstarter target.

CLASS OF HEROES II DELUXE

TARGET: $500,000
PROGRESS: $91,528 (18%) with three days to go
WEB: kck.st/HbYV1w

Crowd sourcing isn't just being used for the creation of games that would otherwise never be published. MonkeyPaw and Gaijin Games are using the opportunity to try and catapult the digital release of old-school dungeon crawler *Class Of Heroes II* into the realm of special edition packaged product.

"[Crowd sourcing] will not only allow for a cool Deluxe Pack where the backers can pick some of the pack-ins, but will also provide the budget to do a better localisation that will include dubbing, an English opening song, and game improvements, which will improve the digital release," says Gaijin Games' Victor Ireland, who RPG fans will know as head of early Nineties localisation masters Working Designs. "If we can't fund this," he adds, "the digital release is still coming, but it will have a scaled back, basic localisation."

The publisher is making a wider point, too; it hopes this endeavor will act as a springboard to help uncover the wealth of untranslated, unreleased JRPGs that exist in many companies' archives. "This is not explicitly about a cool *Class of Heroes II Deluxe Pack*, but a referendum on a direct-to-fan relationship that can bypass a lot of the roadblocks that keep cool games that fans want from happening. Support completely matters to help us fund this Kickstarter, which will allow us to go back to Japanese publishers that are on the fence about letting us do their other, more popular titles, and show them that the model works."

NO TIME TO EXPLAIN

TARGET: $7,000 Progress: $26,068 (372%) Web: kck.st/eQSDl7

The Flash prototype is still playable on Newgrounds, but after Tiny Build Games destroyed its target this amusing platformer was followed late last year by *No Time To Explain Season 2*, a further celebration and send-up of gaming memes, tropes and clichés. Apparently, *Minecraft* creator Notch put up $2,000 himself – just another sign of the laudable solidarity of the indie scene.



Each weapon offers a unique form of makeshift propulsion. Ingenious.



There's already a wealth of promotional design work for *Shadowrun Returns* available online.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS

TARGET: $400,000
PROGRESS: £1,382,519 (346%) with 12 days to go WEB: kck.st/HgUlMj

Another high-profile comeback made possible by the crowd sourcing boom, *Shadowrun Returns* will ignore the ill-fated 2007 shooter and take its cues directly from the tabletop RPG of the same name. If anything, FASA's competitive shooter killing off the brand might have been the best thing that could have happened in hindsight – fans outraged that the last game was so far removed from the original source material have been quick to reach for their wallets in support of something a little more familiar, with the project on course to make upwards of four times its original target at the time of going to press.

It's not tough to see why fans have been so flush, either. Harebrained Schemes, the team behind the relaunch, is headed up by ex-FASA man Jordan Weisman – one of *Shadowrun*'s original creators – with the help of a bunch of guys that know the lore inside out and want only the best for the series. It's reportedly a direct sequel to the 16-bit games, hardcore RPG combat and a 2D perspective likely to return in a bid to leave almost as much to the imagination as the tabletop game. We're confident Harebrained will do a great job with *Shadowrun*, but perhaps not as confident as the three people who pledged $10,000, whose commitment to the cause will see them paid a visit by FASA game designer Mike Mulvihill for a live tabletop game, on top of all the perks from lower pledge levels. That, right there, is geek heaven.

→ GABE NEWELL VOWS THERE WILL BE NO *HALF-LIFE 3*, *LEFT 4 DEAD 3* OR *PORTAL 3* ANNOUNCEMENTS AT E3 THIS YEAR

RÉPUBLIQUE

TARGET: $500,000
PROGRESS: $82,050 (17%) with 18 days to go
WEB: kck.st/HEZHSo

The first venture for Camouflaj – the new start-up from *Halo*/ *Metal Gear* veteran Ryan Payton – *Republique* is an ambitious iOS exclusive that Payton describes as 'stealth survival'. Blurring the lines between fiction and reality, the game will explore themes of voyeurism and censorship… so long as the team can secure that lofty target.

LEISURE SUIT LARRY REMAKE

TARGET: $500,000
PROGRESS: $466,908 (93%) with 16 days to go
WEB: kck.st/Haj4Fx

If the remake sells I promise there will be a new game," beams Al Lowe midway through his Kickstarter proposal for an iOS *Larry* remake. It's been the chief temptation for fans to propel the game well towards its goal, cementing that there's still plenty of love left for Larry Laffer.



Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards has already been remade once.

PROJECT FEDORA

WEB: bigfinishgames.com/ games/project-fedora

To be launched on Kickstarter during May, Project Fedora offers Big Finish Games the perfect conduit to continue the story of post-apocalyptic PI Tex Murphy. "We decided this year that if we were ever going to do the next Tex game, it had to be now," says Big Finish founder Chris Jones. "We decided to launch our Kickstarter campaign to help us gauge interest in the franchise."



The end of the FMV game's heyday made us think we'd never see this guy again. But now look.

Kratos Unchained

Every story has a beginning. But for Kratos, such origins have still only really been alluded to throughout the series' five instalments. There was a time before the enraged Spartan was a deadly tornado of blades, blood and body parts, a time before his skin was stained with ashen regret, and perhaps even a time when he wasn't so damned angry. With the newly announced God Of War: Ascension, Sony Santa Monica is looking to wind back the clock and explore how it all began for Kratos, but can an origin story really hope to hold the attention of a bloodthirsty audience when the Blades of Chaos have already claimed most of Ancient Greece's most notable figures?

TITLE: God Of War: Ascension
FORMAT: PlayStation 3
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Sony Santa Monica
RELEASE: TBA



A

CCESSIBILITY IS BORNE OF SIMPLICITY. SONIC RUNS FAST, KIRBY EATS STUFF, MARIO JUMPS ABOUT A LOT AND KRATOS IS VERY, VERY ANGRY. While it's not entirely fair to lump the *God Of War* star in with such a one-dimensional bunch of 2D favourites, his unbridled rage has afforded the franchise a no-nonsense approach and a real sense of immediacy, players simply tasked with pressing buttons to make the furious man smash things in all manner of increasingly awesome ways. But take these established and ever-so-basic principles away from any of these characters and there's little left. A hedgehog with a slightly-above-average walking speed, a pink blob with a stapled stomach, a portly plumber who gets exhausted after one or two pathetic attempts at jumping... obviously none of these would deserve a starring role, and that's where Kratos differs. Because while an anger-free Kratos might be way out of step with the current *God Of War* template and what fans expect of the franchise, a game that explains exactly what it is that could make someone so ridiculously angry is an interesting prospect indeed.

Thanks to the virtual textbooks referenced by the *God Of War* franchise's frequent flashbacks, we already know a fair amount about the events

that precede Ares' betrayal of Kratos (and the accidental murder of his entire family) and the truth is that he already had plenty of reasons to be angry before he was labelled the Ghost of Sparta. During his childhood training, Kratos could only watch as Ares kidnapped his brother Deimos (in fear that he may be the 'marked warrior' prophesied to bring about the fall of Olympus), who was taken and relentlessly tortured by Thanatos, the god of death. It's Deimos's odd birthmark pattern that Kratos wears as a tattoo in his honour, unwittingly writing himself into the prophecy in a way that explains the unbridled hostility Kratos faces from so many of Olympus's residents.

In exploring Kratos's past, it's a fair assumption that Sony Santa Monica will use this pivotal moment as a hook from which to hang a narrative, though a linear chronological structure cannot be so easily assumed – there's nothing to say that *Ascension* won't be primarily set a little further down the timeline, with *Uncharted 3*-style playable flashbacks to Kratos's youth, for instance. There are other options as well, the possibility of a more open-plan exploration of Kratos's formative years offered some credence by the fact that Sony Santa Monica was hiring for developers with open-world experience

"My design for God Of War III saw Kratos killing Zeus in the first ten minutes of the game"

David Jaffe, Series creator

last year. There's also potential for a little crossover with recorded history as opposed to mythology, with Kratos's subsequent rise to captain of the Spartan army potentially suggesting encounters with legendary Spartan figures such as lawgiver Lycurgus or even meme-friendly hero king Leonidas of *300* fame – the idea of Kratos and Leonidas having a shout-off should be one that delights fans of the series or indeed of raised voices in general.

Ω

STILL, IT'S WITH GOOD REASON THAT SONY SLOW-PLAYED THE EARLIER GAMES, WITH KRATOS ONLY FACING OFF WITH ONE DEITY IN THE ORIGINAL INSTALMENT. Series creator David Jaffe casts his mind back to the franchise's early days. "On *God Of War*, our goal was to create a franchise [but] we didn't think too much about a second part while making the first, and instead put all of our love and energy into that single title," he explains. "To us, that was the only way the game had a chance to become something special. There were late nights at the office where I felt we had the next *Star Wars* on our hands and there were other nights where I felt my career was over because the game was going to flop hard. Neither occurred, of course, but I'm pretty thrilled with how it all worked out."

But after Kratos's crimson rampage towards the end of the numbered trilogy, you do have to wonder which other notable figures he could stand to encounter without messing up the timeline. The trailer presents Cerberus and Medusa, both likely to put in appearances even though Kratos rips off the snake-haired one's head in the first game – she can always just slink off at the end of a boss battle, or it could just be a lesser Gorgon. The latter is perhaps the more interesting option, especially given that the game will take place before Kratos receives the Blades of Chaos, and it's this change that stands to have the most prominent effect on gameplay.

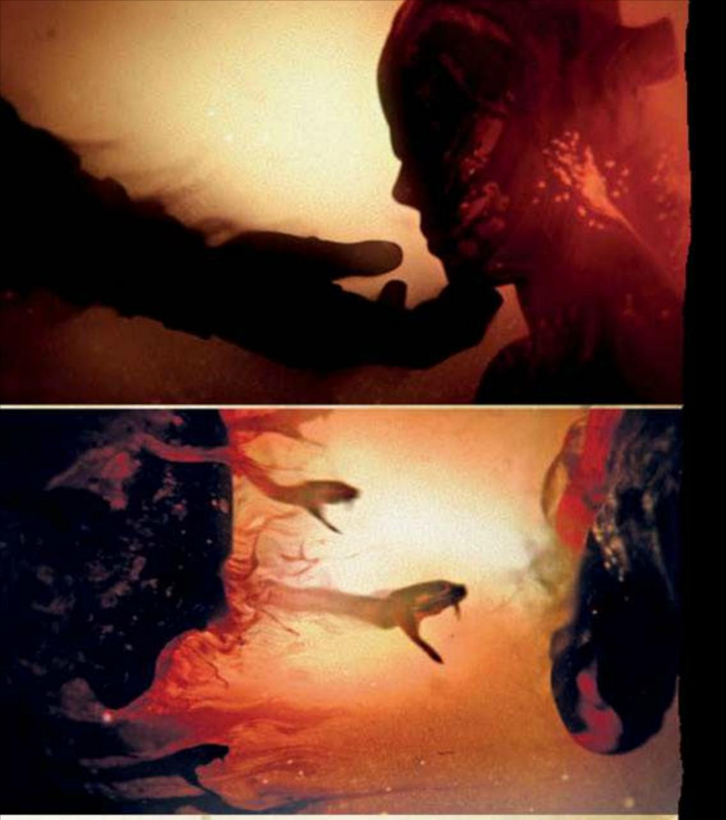
It won't be the first time Kratos will have been stripped of his trademark chains, though without Ares's power *Ascension*'s Kratos will be more human than in previous games, and the implications here are interesting. What if the run-of-the-mill creatures of myth that have played the role of grunts in the series suddenly get a promotion off the back of this change? What if that cyclops or minotaur that you used to make short work of was suddenly a nigh-impossible boss fight, the goalposts moving due to Kratos's mortality and the whole bombastic nature of the game dialled back for a more grounded experience? It'd be a brave move, sure, but a prequel needs to tell the 'before he was a demigod' part of the story, and there seem to be few other ways of doing so.

Some would even argue that an origin story is a curious angle for the franchise to pursue in the first place, with Jaffe among their number. "I've never cared



A SILHOUETTE OF CERBERUS, THE THREE-HEADED DOG THAT GUARDS THE UNDERWORLD, SUGGESTS KRATOS WILL CROSS THE RIVER STYX AT SOME POINT IN THIS ADVENTURE.



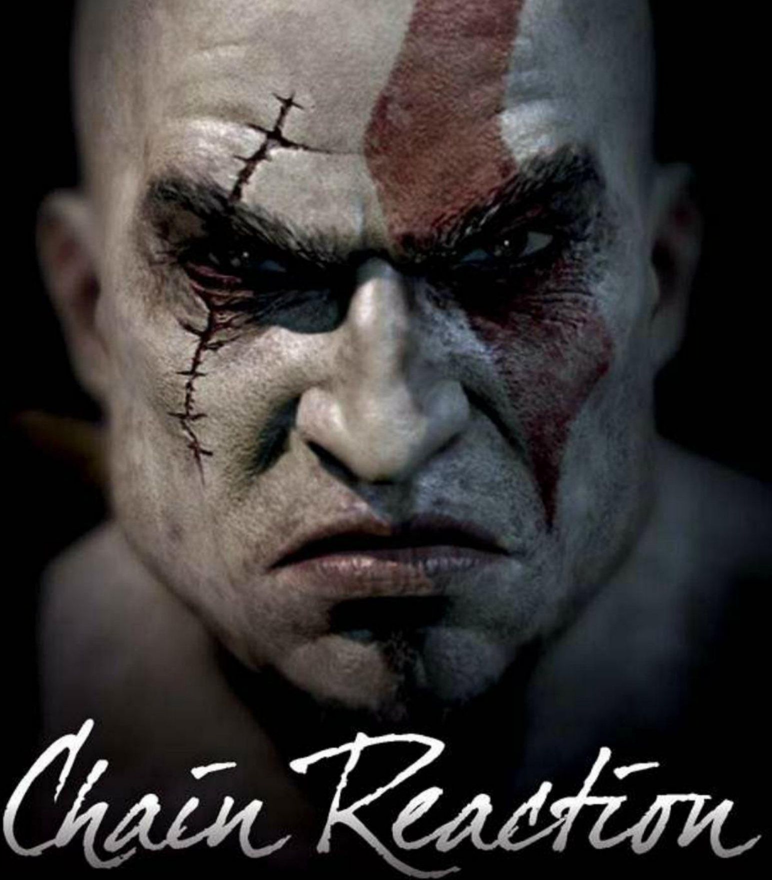


■ Gorgons have featured throughout the *God Of War* series. What part they may play in this prequel remains a mystery.

for prequels because you already know how things are going to get wrapped up, so some of the suspense can't help but be drained," he tells us, though he still seems confident in his former team's ability to make it work. "I'm sure the crew at Sony Santa Monica is going to write in enough compelling twists and turns to more than make up the lack of 'I wonder what is going to happen in the end' suspense that all prequels lack."

Ω

Mind you, if Jaffe had stayed with Sony and had his way, *God Of War III* would have been a totally different experience to the Olympian massacre the Santa Monica team produced. "My design for *God Of War III* saw Kratos killing Zeus in the first ten minutes of the game," he explains, going on to detail his entire ludicrous yet oddly exciting pitch. "The other gods of ancient times would rush in to fill the power vacuum on Olympus. Kratos gets the bright idea to trick them all into fighting each other and to keep the war going for hundreds of years. This would have allowed the player to travel the ancient world and see Norse Kratos and Egyptian Kratos costumes and weapons. My favourite part was going to be Kratos using the Medusa head to freeze a giant boss in the Egyptian desert, which ultimately became the Sphinx we know today. Consumed by the war, the gods of Norse and Egyptian and Greek mythology forget all about man. Abandoned by their protectors, humankind is thrown into chaos, which causes man to abandon his belief in the gods. With no-one left to believe in the gods, they ultimately fade away, and, with all of the gods finally gone for good, he uses the Blades of Chaos to slit his wrists and he finally is able to die once and for all."



Chain Reaction

A LOOK AT TWITTER'S REACTION TO GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION

Well it got leaked a day early, but now you can watch the trailer. *God Of War: Ascension* coming at you.
The game's director Todd Papy unleashes a grumpy Kratos on the world.

I love the *God Of War* games, but the new trailer just says to me "Kratos is angry again. And he still looks like Goldberg." I need more.
Q Entertainment's James Mielke needs more wrath with his titans.

So there's now as many *God Of War* prequels as there are non-prequels? MOVING FORWARDS.
Videogamer's Martin Gaston, clearly not a fan of George Lucas either.

God Of War: Ascension trailer thoughts: Kratos doesn't shout enough. #ShoutMoreKratos #BeReallyAngryKratos
X360's Simon Miller needs help drowning out the voices.

Teaser was fine but didn't really show anything. That said, all the new *GOW* teaser needed to do was say: 'Sony Santa Monica is making a new *GOW* game/enter credit card number here' and it wudda been great.
***God Of War* creator David Jaffe in no way regretful of abandoning the gravy train.**

I should've just said I think *God Of War* is a terrible game when I was on The Tester. I should've just come out and said it.
The Tester star Arin Hanson has no regrets about not making Sony's cut.

@Punkage really? *God Of War 3* wrapped up Kratos' saga pretty neatly. Taking it down a Norse/Egyptian route would have been better for the series...
Doublesix Games's Benjamin Smith on the franchise's exhausted story prospects.

Quite frankly, if I was given the choice between a new *God Of War* or *Heavenly Sword*, I'd go for the latter tbh.
VG24/7's Johnny Cullen would rather have something imaginary than an actual game.

Guys, confession. I friggin' hate Kratos. He's like if the lovechild of Marcus Fenix and Vegeta got way too into *300* cosplay.
Destructoid's Max Scoville can't quite see the sex appeal in a broody half-naked man covered in blood.

I feel like whoever was responsible for the *God Of War: Ascension* trailer was a big fan of *Dexter*.
Ubisoft's Zack Cooper, a fan of mass murderers from any time period.

The proposed finale would have sent the tabloids into a frenzy, too. "The game was going to end with the player being able to control the Three Wise Men following the North Star on the night of Christ's birth," Jaffe reveals. "The new, current gods rise, showing that man – however evolved he is – needs something to believe in. In the epilogue, the new gods call upon Kratos once more. With his expertise at murder and his comfort with death, he is forcibly given the role of The Grim Reaper. The Blades of Chaos are melted down and become the Reaper's scythe, marking a new chapter and a new time period for Kratos's adventures." While a radical change of direction, at least Jaffe's open ending would have left Kratos somewhere to go – *GOW III*'s 'everybody's dead, Dave' finale left virtually nothing left for the demigod to smash, shout at or screw, hence why Sony has had little choice but to return to the past.

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IT MIGHT SEEM FROM JAFFE'S ELABORATE PLANS THAT HE MISSES WORKING ON THE FRANCHISE, THOUGH HE DOESN'T SEEM TOO SAD TO HAVE DISTANCED HIMSELF FROM HIS BABY. "I wanted to start my own company so I left Sony," he says. "I feel the first *God Of War* accomplished everything I wanted to accomplish with the game. It would have been cool to stick around and work on more of the games but I get really restless and bored, and once I've personally gotten to the top of a mountain, I like to find new challenges. I remain very proud of my accomplishments on the series but I was glad to leave when I did. It was time to move on."

"I don't have much attachment to the series," he admits, though he somewhat uncharacteristically opens his heart about the odd ritual that allowed him to sever ties with Kratos. "I remember in my head saying goodbye to Kratos a few weeks before *God Of War* came out. I literally had an image of us standing in front of a desert with him on a horse, him with his battle armour and blood lust, staring out at the horizon, ready for new adventures. But in this daydream, he was reluctant to go, like he didn't want to leave me. And I saw myself give him a big hug and – I shit you not – I told him I loved him and I thanked him. And then I told him, 'It's okay... go... go have a great, great time! Go have cool, new adventures!' And he got this look like a little kid who just heard the bell ring on the last day of school and he got this big-ass grin on his face, and then he raced off in to the desert, and that was that. I know it makes me sound like a schmaltzy idiot but that's what I thought about. But doing so really allowed me to let it all go and I've not regretted that at all."

> "I remember in my head saying goodbye to Kratos a few weeks before God Of War came out"
>
> DAVID JAFFE, SERIES CREATOR

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THE OUTSPOKEN CREATOR HAS LET GO, THEN, AND ALL EYES FALL ON HIS FORMER COLLEAGUE TODD PAPY, WHO STEPS UP AS DIRECTOR OF *ASCENSION*. He's no newcomer to the franchise – having been a key player in the design process on each of the main games – and his taking the helm over somebody a little less close to the franchise is enough to suggest that in many ways, *Ascension* will still be a traditional hack-and-slash experience at its core. If the game is indeed to focus on Kratos's past, though, you can expect it to be a far cry from the swirling chain blades and wide area attacks that have become a series staple. Focusing on his rise through

Threat Assessment

Kratos' new adventure treads on the toes of several of this year's high-hoping action-slashers. We work out how they'll fare as *God Of War* swaggers back into the ring.



DmC Devil May Cry

SHOULD DO alright – dashing girly-boy Dante's always arguably had a more diehard following than the comparatively blunt and generic Kratos, while his games contain far more nuanced and elegant combat to boot. But will the ongoing controversy of a Western developer rob the new Capcom instalment of fans at retail?



Darksiders II

THQ MIGHT be pinning a good many of its 2012 hopes on this action-adventure sequel, but the blandness of the *Darksiders* characters and world should prove little threat to Sony's big, angry mascot in the long run. Vigil Games does, however, promise a degree of stat-building depth in Death's adventure that *Ascension* is unlikely to match.



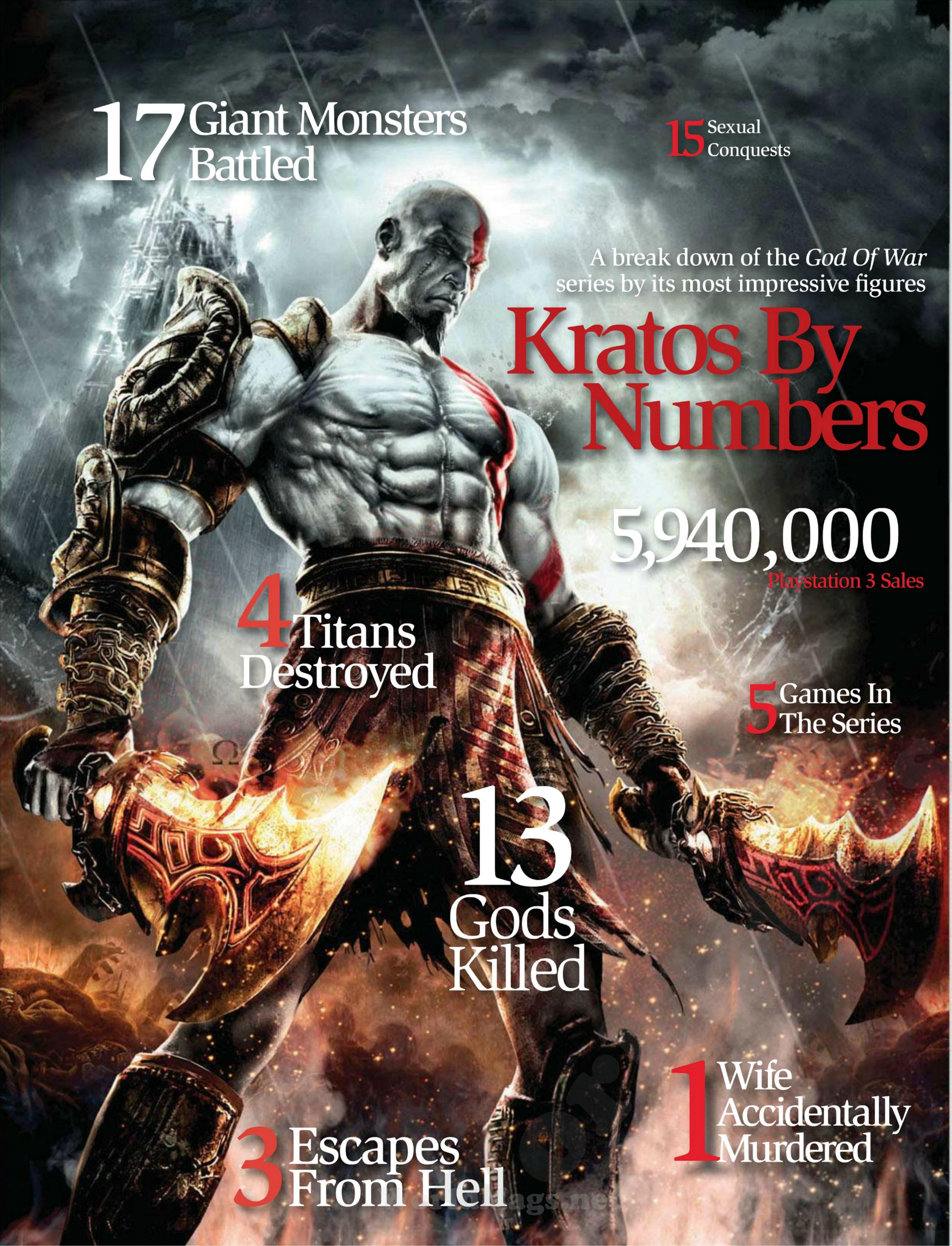
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

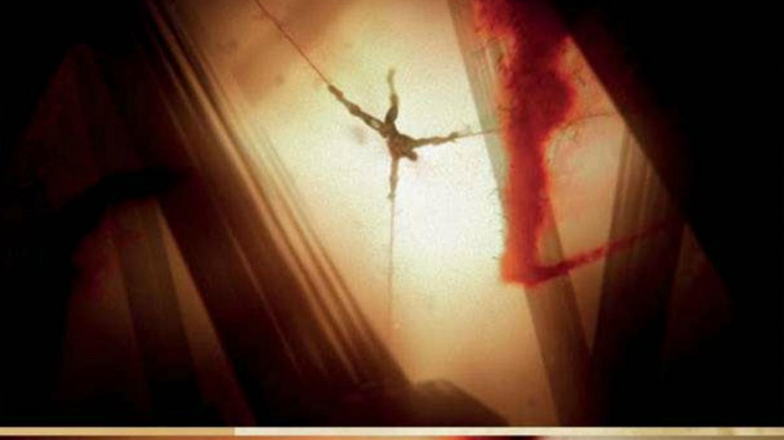
AN ODDITY if ever there was one. Platinum Games effectively made *Devil May Cry* obsolete with 2010's exceptional *Bayonetta*, but failed to truly follow this up with 2011's less elegant *Vanquish*. But if the sword-slashing gameplay holds up, the inheritance of a licence as important as *Metal Gear* should weigh heavily in this game's favour.



Anarchy Reigns

THE ONLINE multiplayer focus of Platinum's other prospective blockbuster this year means that its comparative lack of IP clout is compensated for by a real edge on the gameplay field. Containing characters from other Platinum classics, including *MadWorld*, it's best described as a modern *Power Stone*. It could conceivably go toe-to-toe with *Ascension* in the online arena.


17 Giant Monsters Battled
15 Sexual Conquests
A break down of the *God Of War* series by its most impressive figures
Kratos By Numbers
5,940,000 Playstation 3 Sales
4 Titans Destroyed
5 Games In The Series
13 Gods Killed
1 Wife Accidentally Murdered
3 Escapes From Hell





■ *Ascension* recounts the origins of Kratos's attitude problems, before he inherits the Blades of Chaos.

"If it were me directing, I'd push for a change to the formula. But I'm also fully aware that millions of God Of War fans love Kratos and his adventures as is"

David Jaffe, Series creator

the ranks of the Spartan army would mean a far more conventional arsenal, but his years of intense training would still provide a level of combat prowess capable of holding together any such simplified violence. There's no reason why Kratos couldn't wield something a little less standard issue, either – at least a history of using chain-based weapons would go some way towards explaining how come he's able to pick up the Blades of Chaos and instantly employ them so effortlessly.



But however close *Ascension* falls on a mechanical level to the games it both follows and precedes, Sony Santa Monica is making several changes that will set this latest outing apart from its predecessors, most notably the addition of multiplayer. It's an initially repulsive concept, we're sure you'll agree – an idea that fills the mind with horrible visions of 16-man deathmatch modes where a bunch of Kratoses spin around a bunch until everyone dies. But the proven ability of the team – and indeed the impressive multiplayer integration across all of Sony's first-party line-up – is enough to reassure us that this hypothetical mess won't find its way into *God Of War*. Cooperative play offers something far more interesting, especially if the overall craziness of the action is to be downplayed. We were, after all, similarly sceptical of the inclusion of multiplayer in the similarly explosive *Uncharted* franchise, though it has to be said that it hasn't worked out too bad after all for Drake and chums.

"That could be cool. I could see that working," muses Jaffe, but again, he's got his own ideas about how it should all play out. "I'd love to see player one be Kratos and player two be this stupid annoying sidekick that – for some to-be-determined story reason – Kratos is stuck with for the whole adventure and in the end, once the main quest is over, Kratos just snaps the poor kid's neck."

For all his insightful suggestions on how *Ascension* could be made better, though, the truth is that Jaffe knows little more than the rest of us. "I personally have no idea if the new *God Of War* is going to stir up the formula in a dramatic way or if it's going to be more about executing the heck out of the tried and true recipe," he admits. "If it were me directing, I'd push for a change to the formula. But I'm also fully aware that millions of *God Of War* fans love Kratos and his adventures as is, and even if the core play experience doesn't change much from *God Of War III*, the game will still be a blast."

And again, the experience and talent of Sony Santa Monica makes it hard to disagree with the series' creator on this one. Whether the prequel setting forces the team to alter the core template or whether it manages to find a way to slip back into character regardless of its earlier spot on the timeline, *Ascension* is all but guaranteed to deliver. There are countless pitfalls to be avoided – unnecessarily elaborate boss battles where the baddies slink off conveniently to be killed another day, ham-fisted 'press X to kill wife'-style QTE sequences and an over-reliance on multiplayer as a feature, to name but a few – but chains or no, the return of Kratos is exactly the kind of exclusive Sony needs in order to help keep the PlayStation 3 afloat amid a sea of next-gen rumours and speculation. And fear not, rage-lovers – Sony is fully aware that it has the anti-Hulk on its hands in Kratos. We *only* like him when he's angry...

To be continued...



By the time you read this games™ will have been updated with more details on *God Of War: Ascension*. To read the latest and see the first gameplay imagery go to gamestm.co.uk/?p=5926 or scan the QR code above with your smartphone of choice.





■ *These images should comfort fans who are worried that a younger Kratos will make for a neutered adventure*

Mything in Action

games™ talks to Nottingham University's professor of ancient Greek literature, Judith Mossman, to try and divine Kratos' next move by peeling back the stories that form the basis for his character

It can be expected that the story will draw on key mythological events and characters; who, or what, do you think a war-like Spartan general – or ultimately an angry demigod, might end up fighting or otherwise interacting with?

There are mythological stories about humans fighting gods at a very early point in Greek mythology, such as Heracles fighting with the gods against the giants. Heracles is the son of Zeus, so more or less is a demigod. There are also the fights between Diomedes and Aphrodite and Ares (whom he wounds) in Homer, *Iliad* books 5 and 6, Achilles (another demigod) and the river god Xanthus (aka Scamander) in *Iliad* book 21. Homer sometimes refers to his heroes being able to lift and throw rocks that in his day could only be moved by an ox and cart.

Mythically speaking, how accurate is the idea of mortal humans being given permanent, or temporary, powers by the gods, and what personal sacrifices may they have had to make for those powers along the way?

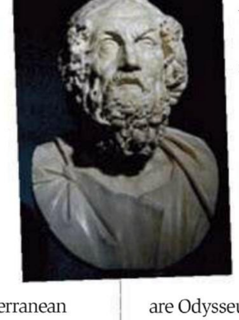
One example is King Midas, who wished that everything he touched should turn to gold and then when it did he embraced his daughter and so turned her into a golden statue. Achilles in the Iliad is provided with divine armour (arranged by his mother, a goddess), but his sacrifice has already been made: he has chosen a short but glorious life over a long obscure one by leaving for Troy, and has lost his best friend Patroclus.

Another story thread that is sure to appear in Kratos' origin story is the tragic death of his wife and family, who Ares later forces him to turn his blades on, and murder in cold blood. Does Greek mythology contain similar stories of godly revenge on disobedient mortals and, if so, how do they play out?

There is a very large number of such story types. This one sounds most reminiscent of the story of Heracles being driven mad and in his madness killing his wife and children (various reasons given, but the canonical one is that Hera was angry with him for being her husband Zeus's illegitimate son and so arranged it), or Ajax being driven mad and killing the army's flocks instead of his enemies because he had offended Athena. Other possible revenges include being turned into something (Arachne, for boasting that she could weave better than Athena), having one's kingdom ravaged by a monster, being blasted with a thunderbolt, or being flayed alive by Apollo for challenging him to a musical competition (Marsyas the satyr).

What different kinds of adventures did such warriors get up to beyond taking part in massive wars in events such as the war with Troy?

Spartan military success is not a mythological phenomenon but a historical one. Those who Homer says fought at Troy came from all over Greece and are mostly described as Achaeans or Danaans (generic terms for Greeks) rather than Spartan or Athenian. Homer was composing circa 800BC, and if the events he describes have any basis in fact they date back to 1270BC. Sparta came to prominence politically during the sixth and fifth centuries BC (500-400BC). In response to land hunger she both invaded neighbouring territories and sent out colonies to other parts of the Mediterranean world. Her military success, joined with others, most prominently Athens, against the Persians (480-79BC), sealed her military reputation on land.



Military success was based not on heroic individualism but on collective discipline and physical toughness. Their unforgiving dedication to military success impressed all other Greeks, especially after the iconic battle of Thermopylae, when one of their Kings, Leonidas, held a mountain pass against Xerxes to allow the Greeks further south time to prepare for invasion, and died with all the Spartans present (the Three Hundred). Herodotus recorded their epitaph: 'Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, That here obedient to their laws we lie.' As to godly power games: all ancient Greeks regarded themselves as permanently at the mercy of the gods.

Finally, Kratos will descend into madness. How was madness manifested and represented at the time?

Madness is indeed a common theme, particularly in Greek tragedy. Aeschylus represents the madness of Orestes caused by having murdered his mother at the end of Libation Bearers (458BC) by having him see the Furies, the spirits of revenge, when they are invisible to everyone else. Sophocles shows the madness of Ajax in his play of the same name, by showing him torturing cattle under the impression they are Odysseus and Agamemnon. His realisation that he has been driven mad and shamed prompts his suicide.

Euripides shows both Heracles and Orestes going mad: in *The Madness of Heracles* (414BC) Heracles is driven mad by decree of Hera while sacrificing, and kills his wife and children under the impression they are his enemy Eurystheus's. On recovering his wits he bitterly reproaches the gods, but is taken to Athens by Theseus to be purified and does not kill himself. In *Orestes* (408BC), Euripides' character seems to have recurrent fits of madness during which he hallucinates.

It's interesting that in Euripides the madness is much more like a physical fever than it is in Aeschylus fifty years earlier. In all cases rolling bloodshot eyes, frothing at the mouth and manic laughter feature largely in the description of madness.

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Nick Jones



Generation Z

The next-generation is coming but it won't be what you expect

Back in 2010, Valve's Gabe Newell took to the stage at Sony's pre-E3 press conference to announce *Portal 2* for PlayStation 3. Along with that announcement came another, less headline-friendly one: Steamworks would be a part of the deal – play *Portal 2* on the PlayStation 3 and connect to Steam, Steam cloud, Steam friends and Steam achievements.

No other Steamworks/console crossovers followed but the point was taken, and the intent clear: Valve wanted a piece of that box under your TV.

Six years ago no one could have imagined a PC-centric company like Valve would be a part of the console landscape, but that landscape looked very different back then. There was an established way of doing things: every five years or so console manufacturers would release more powerful hardware, and each generation would have a winner and a loser. Commodore versus Spectrum, Nintendo versus Sega, Sony versus Microsoft. And all the while, PC would remain in the background, keeping itself to itself, doing what it did best: making games that would only work with a hard drive, lots of memory, a mouse and a keyboard.

But in six years, things have changed. Nintendo was first to challenge the status quo when it matched its relatively underpowered Wii with an overpowered marketing team. Then came Apple and OnLive and Samsung and Gaikai and Google and LG and Facebook. Even Microsoft and Sony's own digital distribution platforms have had an unpredictable and profound effect on the divergence of gaming platforms, and in the way and the type of games that are made today; without XBLA and PS Store, so-called indie-style gaming would have remained confined to a PC hard drive.

In the past six years, we've lived through a digital distribution revolution and all that entails, from how we buy videogames to the way that developers have designed their games to maximise their profitability with this new distribution method.

Post-digital revolution consoles have benefited enormously from this upheaval. Right now, 3DS, PS Vita and Tegra 3-powered tablets offer portable gaming that's on a par with current-gen home gaming, along with the benefits of cheap 'mini gaming'. There's also plenty of internet talk at the moment about how Apple TV (and Apple's rumoured AX-chipped iTV) is a gaming console in disguise, and will bring the iTunes model from iDevices to the living room.

The future seems to be more DLC and more content that's designed to use (and abuse) the distribution methods broadband enables.

None of this is news to Valve. Steam has been distributing content digitally to PCs worldwide ever since it became the test bed back in 2004. But even with *Half-Life 2* as its killer app no one was sure if it would succeed. Last year Steam revenue was estimated at over $1 billion, and Forbes listed Newell himself as the 854th richest billionaire (out of 1,226) in the world. *Left 4 Dead* sold reasonably well, but not *that* well.

So the rumours of Valve developing its own gaming set-top box should come as no surprise.

The 'Steam Box' could offer the best of all worlds. Valve would do well to offer processing power to compete with the next PlayStation and Xbox. These next-gen consoles are likely to be as powerful as today's (very) high-end gaming PCs, so it wouldn't be too difficult, or expensive, to use off-the-shelf components to create something that's just as quick and sexy. Steam is already a haven for indie developers, so it would have that angle covered too.

> Steam puts PS Store and Xbox Marketplace to shame when it comes to the cost of new games. And Steam sales are the stuff of legend

Then there's the pricing. Steam puts PS Store and Xbox Marketplace to shame when it comes to the cost of new games. And Steam sales are the stuff of legend. Both *Portal* games for under a fiver? Yes, please.

The real win could be with third-party partnerships. Steam Box, with its PC/Windows architecture, would/could run anything that Microsoft, OnLive, Google, Netflix, Facebook or the next big technology company throws at it. For a percentage, of course.

My point? Well, for all my Valve love, I don't actually think that the next gen will be Steam Box. Nor do I think it will be Apple's iTV or Gaikai Facebook integration or Tegra 4 or Wii U or even Xbox 720 or PS4. It will be all of the above and probably more. The next generation of gaming won't be marked by power or performance but by the way in which you access it. And that, by the look of it, will be on every networked device you own.

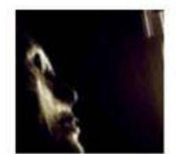


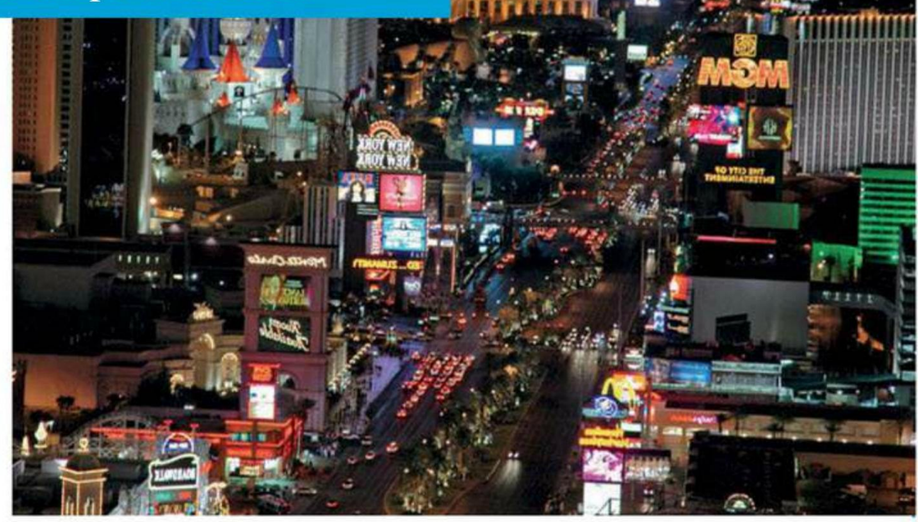
Nick Jones is Editor in Chief of NowGamer.com



LETTER FROM AMERICA

from Exiled Briton, Gray 'The Shape' Nicholson





Listen: I dislike children as much as anyone, but two kids drew so many misty eyes this month from emotionally stunted internetters that they could not be ignored. Both from the golden state of California (where dreams can come true!), they have set the wheels of their futures in motion with charming deeds.

Caine Monroy, 9, built an arcade out of cardboard boxes and packing tape in his dad's shop. The business, a used auto parts store on North Mission Road in Boyle Heights, LA, is not the sort of place that needs showroom space up front, and Caine began entertaining himself building Chuck-E-Cheese-style games while his dad worked in the office behind.

There's a football game with plastic army men defenders, a classic claw game using a hook on a string; it's all very sweet, teetering on the cusp of make believe and crude functionality. Caine kept building until the front of the store became filled with his cardboard creations, and started selling tokens to play them.

Being LA, one person who came by was a young filmmaker, who stopped in for an old door handle and left with the inspiration for a short documentary: *Caine's Arcade*. Shallow focus makes everything significant and emotional, and soon a simple website with a donation button next to the video had raked in $100,000 for Caine's college fund.

The target was raised to $250,000 for "tutoring and getting him ready", Nirvan Mullick, the filmmaker, told local news channel ABC 7. A benevolent foundation got wind of the story and agreed to match each donation, dollar for dollar. Caine's boxes stand to bring in half a million dollars, for increasingly vague purposes. Even Yale costs only $50,000 a year.

Dylan Viale, 10, was battling frustration when he embarked on the path that led him to the 'aww, bless!' headlines. He spends a lot of time with his grandmother, but couldn't get her involved in his major hobby – videogaming – because she's blind.

Using YoYo Games' development package, GameMaker Lite, he set about creating a new type of game, one his grandma could enjoy. The key was using sound as sensory feedback for a series of mazes: sounds for collecting, travelling, hitting a wall, nearing an enemy; constant audio cues made the levels quickly navigable, the game playable, by a blind granny.

Dylan entered *Quacky's Quest* in the science fair at Hidden Valley Elementary School, where he's in fifth grade, and won. Dad is now urging him to rethink his dream of becoming a cop or bin man and consider a career in game design.

Brass tacks. Who is your least favourite? A cardboard arcade is not that different from the forts and cars and time machines many of us made with leftover appliance boxes, but we didn't have moving documentaries made for us, nor the mechanism to extract a dollar as easily as a tear. Caine charges, advertises and even copy-protects his tickets, sitting beside the 'machines' like a proprietor rather than someone who loves games. A future businessman.

Dylan's clearly a good kid – almost *too* good, Disney good – but did he *have* to have the validation of beating a bunch of battery potatoes and baking soda volcanoes at the science fair? Also, GameMaker isn't C++; it's a kit requiring no coding that you can get a game running in pretty quickly if you modify the example levels. In my day we had *Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit*. A person could think you were a genius if they didn't know how much *SEUCK* did for you.

Probably you think I'm just bitter. Probably you're right.

> A cardboard arcade is not that different from the forts and cars and time machines many of us made with leftover boxes

MANY THANKS
GRAY

TOP 5 US PRE-ORDERS

1. GHOST RECON FUTURE SOLDIER **(360)**
2. ASSASSIN'S CREED III **(360)**
3. DIABLO III **(PC)**
4. GUILD WARS 2 **(PC)**
5. ASSASSIN'S CREED III **(PS3)**

The Thread



"It's incredibly average but really enjoyable. It's got that 'gosh-darn it, I want to perfect these scenarios' thing to it. It's the same factor that had me reloading rooms in *Deus Ex*. Working out how to tackle the first section, drawing the enemies in to the house once you've rigged trip wires and land mines is great. I'll definitely grab a copy if/when it drops to something reasonable. It is kind of terrible in a lot of ways though."

DIZZY_EST_UN_OEUF PORTRAYS THE CONFLICTS OF SNIPER ELITE V2, AT THE SOCIETY (SOCIETY.MISKIE.NET)

WISH LIST

IT WOULD BE REALLY NICE IF YOU GOT ME:
AN EKORNES CHAIR FOR THE GAME ROOM.



KONGETSU

Q ENTERTAINMENT'S JAMES MIELKE REPORTS FROM JAPAN

Gaming's New Musical 8-Bit Hero



Amid the endless, hellish assault of modern Japan's prefabricated assembly-line pop groups – like AKB48, Sexy Zone and, ugh, Fairies – you'd be forgiven for crying out for a musical saviour to rescue your ears from this cynical, atonal siege on the senses. But just when all hope seems lost, a flash of red lights up your periphery. Help is here at last, friends. Professor Sakamoto has arrived. Part-time salaryman, full-time musical genius, this pitch-perfect prodigy has been playing piano since the tender age of four, and – via a handful of scintillating 8-bit-style albums released in Japan – forged a following in his home country that would turn chiptune musicians around the world *Mario*-pipe-green with envy. And he's only just begun.

The Professor Sakamoto saga began when one Kentaro Sakamoto began using his musical talents part-time in a series of bands in Japan's Osaka area. During rehearsals, Sakamoto would play videogame music, much to the delight of his band members. The reaction was so positive, in fact, that he decided to go it alone, and it was in December of 2005 that he first unveiled the 'Professor Sakamoto' persona, he of the wacky Famicom helmet, in a live performance.

"The official story is that I'm sort of a robot and my brain is connected to a Famicom, and when you put a cartridge in it siphons down into my body and I can play anything," Sakamoto says. You can actually find a wealth of Sakamoto's performances on Youtube, usually with an audience member inserting a Famicom cartridge into his helmet and Sakamoto performing the game's music live, complete with sound-effects, alongside someone playing the game.

"I thought I might as well play this in front of an audience," he continues, "and when I started thinking about it I thought the best way was to have a strong visual impact. That's when I thought about putting a Famicom on my head, and that's where the character came from. It started with the visual image, and the story grew out of the visuals."

To label Professor Sakamoto's music as 'chiptune' music is doing it a disservice. While his earlier efforts created during his college days are definitely chiptuned, his recent albums *Insert*, *SKMT* and *8-Bit Jukebox* are much more lavish creations. A good place to start would probably be his song 'Samurai' from his album *SKMT*. Intricate and bleepy, this track presses all the right geek buttons of any 8-bit fan. But anyone with two functioning ears and a pair of headphones will be able to tell that Sakamoto's compositions are much more elaborate constructs than the bleepy bits that are so prevalent these days. Sakamoto's tracks feel as at home on a club's soundsystem as a gamer's home theatre. Rife with bass and squelchy, distorted drums, the sound of Sakamoto is expansive. Impressively, he composes every note of his albums from scratch in his home studio.

When pressed to rattle off some of his favourite games, he cites *Chrono Trigger* and *Dr. Mario* among his top choices, and when asked to list a few of his favourite game soundtracks the ones that spring to mind are the *Mother/Earthbound* soundtrack, Koichi Sugiyama's *Dragon Quest* scores and, finally, Sega's *NiGHTS Into Dreams*. Having listened to much of his music leading up to my interview with him, the *NiGHTS* connection suddenly makes sense; the *NiGHTS* soundtrack features the same uplifting swells and peaks that drive Sakamoto's most propulsive tracks. One of Sakamoto's uncommon gifts is the ability to hear a piece of music once, and then play it back perfectly, live in concert. I told him I'd love to hear him do versions of the original *Panzer Dragoon* theme as well as the main score from the original *Grandia*. Sakamoto smiles, and says to me, "I'm going to have to look those up and try them!"

> **Professor Sakamoto's tracks feel as at home on a club's soundsystem as a gamer's home theatre**

Since Professor Sakamoto is usually found with a Famicom mounted on his head I ask him if his arch-rival would be 'Mr. Mega-Drive.' Sakamoto laughs and showed me a photo on his iPhone of two 'rivals' wearing a Mega-Drive and PC Engine helmet at a recent show he did. "These are actually my fans," he tells me, and laughs.

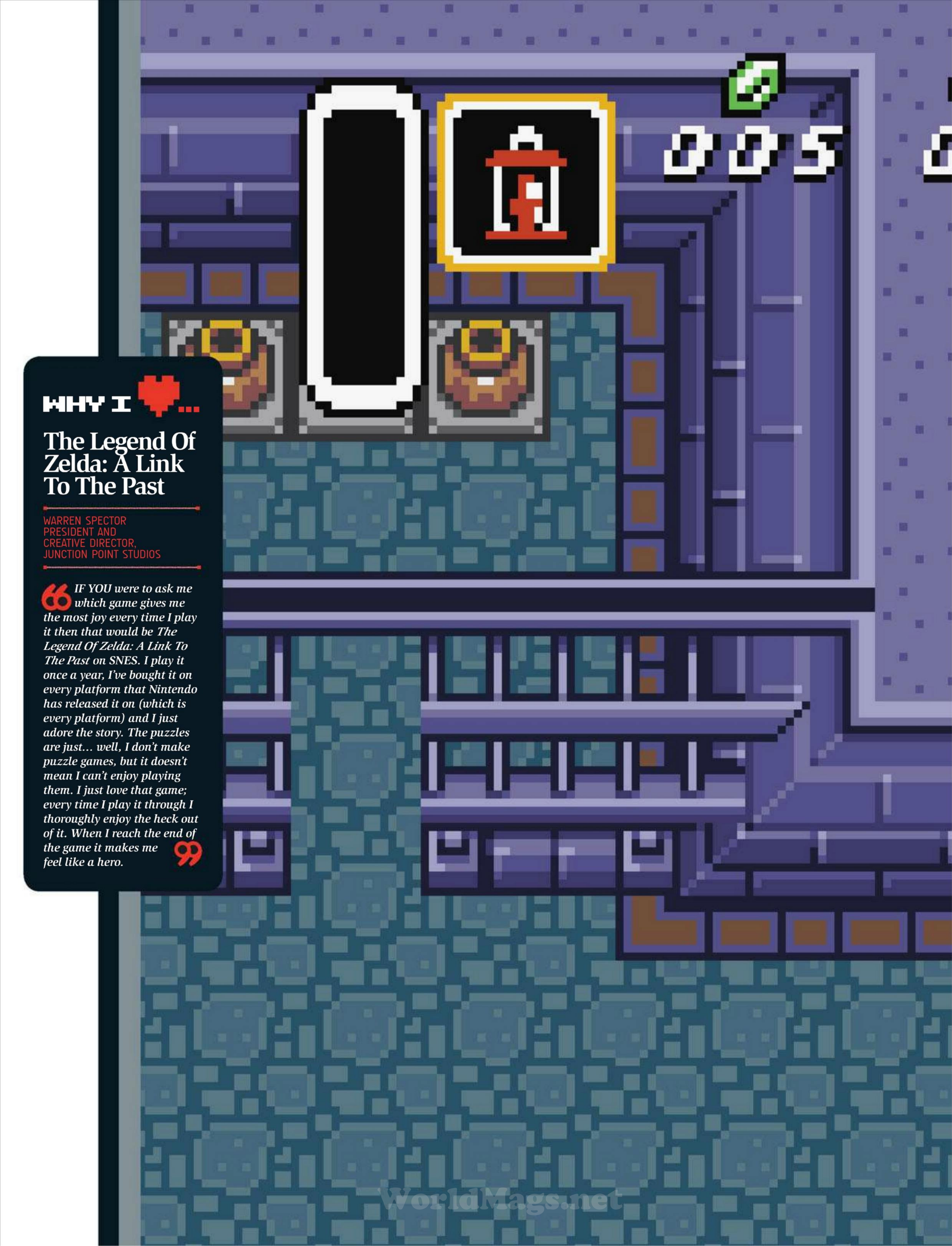
Finally, I ask him if he feels that the 8-bit era of music is the best, or due to its popularity in today's indie scene if it's at risk of becoming a cliché. "The 8-bit music that was created for Famicom was restricted because of the hardware capabilities. So people who wrote for the hardware really had to maximise and make the most of it, and as a result created more inspired, memorable compositions."

Truer words were never spoken. Gaming audio technology may be light years beyond the 8-bit era now, but I've met the industry's chiptune champion, and his name is Professor Sakamoto.

CAUSING A COMMOTION

● One of the fun parts of doing this interview was the photoshoot I did with Professor Sakamoto in Shibuya Crossing. In the sea of people crossing the intersection came Sakamoto, wearing his Famicom atop his head, visor lowered, and black cape flowing behind him. Professor Sakamoto is tall, so the chaos of passers-by pulling out their phone cameras was truly impressive. Later on, in the trendy Harajuku district, the throngs who surrounded us were legion. One guy even pulled out a full-on professional DSLR and rack-mounted flash. It was fascinating because Japanese people are usually so demure and polite. But when Sakamoto came waltzing down the street people were tripping over themselves to get a photo of this strange-looking man. Priceless!

MANY THANKS, JAMES MIELKE



WHY I ❤…

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

WARREN SPECTOR
PRESIDENT AND
CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
JUNCTION POINT STUDIOS

IF YOU were to ask me which game gives me the most joy every time I play it then that would be The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past on SNES. I play it once a year, I've bought it on every platform that Nintendo has released it on (which is every platform) and I just adore the story. The puzzles are just… well, I don't make puzzle games, but it doesn't mean I can't enjoy playing them. I just love that game; every time I play it through I thoroughly enjoy the heck out of it. When I reach the end of the game it makes me feel like a hero.



“I play it once a year and I’ve bought it on every platform that Nintendo has released it on”

WARREN SPECTOR, JUNCTION POINT

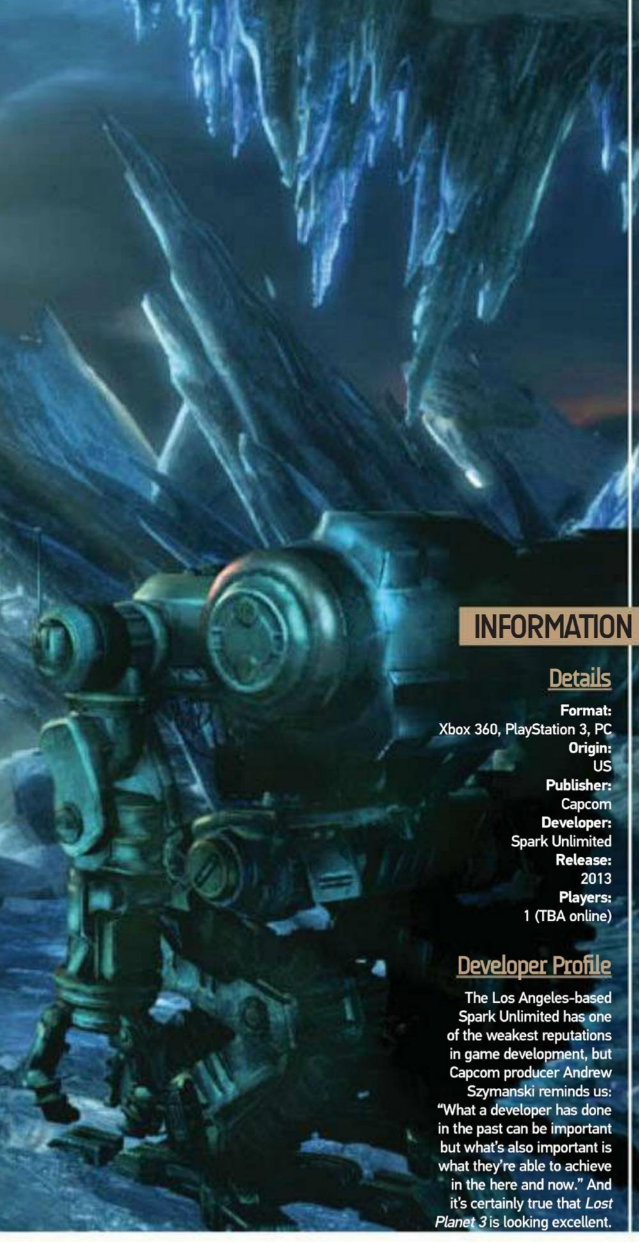
PREVIEWS CONTENTS

■ Although the focus of the *LP3* reveal was on the single-player campaign, Capcom has confirmed that the game will feature both co-op and competitive online play. Whether that means similar gameplay to *LP2*, however, remains to be seen.





■ Inset: *LP3*'s industrialised, working class interpretation of space recalls cult Eighties sci-fi like *Outland*, and the game has both the visuals and the soundtrack to match. Genre fans will love its refreshing move away from military themes.



Lost Planet 3

CONCEPT ■ A return to the series' roots sees *Lost Planet 3* go back to ice worlds, with a renewed emphasis on narrative-driven action.

Capcom's surprise sequel does everything but leave us cold

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Spark Unlimited
Release: 2013
Players: 1 (TBA online)

Developer Profile

The Los Angeles-based Spark Unlimited has one of the weakest reputations in game development, but Capcom producer Andrew Szymanski reminds us: "What a developer has done in the past can be important but what's also important is what they're able to achieve in the here and now." And it's certainly true that *Lost Planet 3* is looking excellent.

Developer History

Legendary
2008 [Multi]
Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty
2008 [Multi]
Call Of Duty: Finest Hour
2004 [Multi]

High Point

Spark hasn't had a high point yet. *Lost Planet 3* will surely be a career-defining project.



Just what is *Lost Planet*? The first two games in this relatively young Capcom series are so different from each other – one a standard action game, punctuated by boss battles, the other a squad-based *Monster Hunter* with guns – that it's hard to define exactly what makes this series what it is. Thankfully, Capcom producer Andrew Szymanski is on hand to remind us.

"The environment is a character in and of itself; you've got the Akrid creatures; you have the robots, and of course the shooting. Each of these elements in and of themselves might not carry an entire game, but put them together and you have an amazing group of pillars that we feel are important to the franchise." For the third *Lost Planet*, Szymanski, series creator Kenji Oguro and the development team at Spark Unlimited have taken those pillars and rearranged them into a sequel that's just as different again. "One thing that's great about Capcom is that they never get too bogged down in what a franchise should be," explains Szymanski. "So rather than make the same kind of game over and over, we acknowledge that there are pieces we love about a franchise, but that we can fit them together in a new way."

Ironically, that 'new way' is actually inspired by *Lost Planet*'s origins. The design team's mantra is "return to extreme conditions" – a reference to the subtitle of the first game in the series – which has guided every decision about the direction of *Lost Planet 3*. "When we talk to people and think about what makes *Lost Planet* unique, a lot of people point to the snow and the ice and the extreme environments," says Szymanski. "We really wanted to feature that again, but also go above and beyond how it's been done before."

The best way to do that, says Capcom, was to create a prequel. "We theorised that the planet would have been much more foreboding in the past before humans came and started taming the planet. And that's really where the initial idea came from – going back and showing the first colonisation of the planet."

As such, *Lost Planet 3* puts players in the woolly shoes of a very different hero to either *LP1*'s Wayne or *LP2*'s faceless commandos. New protagonist Jim is "not a space marine and he's not a soldier", says Szymanski. "He's the guy who's smart, funny and loves his family. We think that whether you have children or not, whether you're married or not, you can really sympathise with his situation." More precisely, Jim is a working man. As one of the first people to land on the planet E.D.N. III, he's responsible for colonisation of the largely inhospitable arctic world and will use his Utility Rig, a huge robot suit much larger and more industrial than the weaponised Vital Suits of previous games, to dig and drill into the planet surface.

/// With the planet inhabited by the monstrous and extremely dangerous Akrid, however, it's probably for the best that Jim's Utility Suit also proves pretty handy in a fight. More like a giant versions of the Power Loader from *Aliens* than the sort of anime suit you usually see in games, the Utility Rig handles pretty differently. It does have some firepower but its greatest assets are its two arms – one sporting a mean, vice-like grip, and the other a huge drill. Large enemies that tower over Jim when on foot are dwarfed by the Utility Suit, and if the player is skilled enough to grab such an Akrid, that massive left hand will literally squeeze the thermal energy out of them in an instant.

> "When you think of Lost Planet you think of a cold desolate planet. LP3 focuses on this as a core tenet"
> KENJI OGURO CAPCOM

In the impressive demonstration that Capcom gives **games™**, we see Jim and his Rig put to the test by that old videogame favourite – a giant enemy crab. Two of them, in fact. The first is

fought on-foot, and the second he fights using his Utility Rig, neatly showing off how one enemy can play so differently depending on context. Like previous *LP* games, the boss's weak spots are obviously telegraphed by thermal energy deposits – in this case, a few glowing through from cracks in the crab's shell, and two more in the exposed muscle of the creature's claw joints. Shooting the joints blasts off those claws as you'd expect, while a few shots of the shell weaken the crab and cause him to scream in pain. Then it's a simple case of tossing a grenade in his mouth and watching the crabmeat fly everywhere.

/// When fought in the Utility Rig, however, this battle is quite different. Both crab and Rig are equally sized and, with all Rig gameplay viewed in first-person, the fight plays out a lot like a boxing match. Jim can use the arms of the Rig to block and punch and, like a galactic version of *Punch-Out!!*, it's possible to find weaknesses in the enemy's attack patterns to counter at exactly the right time. Do this and you can grab one of the monster's claws with the Rig's left hand then drill at its joints before pummelling its shell. It's a very cool way to repeat a boss battle – as Capcom loves to do – but in a way that doesn't feel at all repetitive.

In fact, the boss re-use works so well that the game quickly throws another, albeit slightly harder, giant crab at the player. This one doesn't have the obvious weak points of its siblings. Instead it has a very small vulnerable part to its belly, just where the Rig can't get to. This time, Jim uses that powerful left arm to grab the crab by its claw and hold it in place just long enough for him to slide out of the Rig's cockpit, get right underneath the crab's belly while on foot, and blast away at its weak spot with his rifle. It's an elegant and clever gameplay device that suggests players will have to be quite intelligent with the way they fight enemies later in the game.

That dichotomy between on-foot and in-mech play is central to the design of *Lost Planet 3*, and is best exemplified by the internal cave systems that Jim will have to explore without his Rig, due to the small size of the tunnels. Not just a change of scenery from the vast wastelands of the planet surface, these dark and claustrophobic tunnels also bring a shift in game style, edging *Lost Planet 3* closer toward the survival-horror stylings of *Dead Space* than anything the series has previously been known for. Much of these sections are spent exploring eerily lit caves, nervous of what might jump out at you but never quite knowing what to expect or when to expect it.

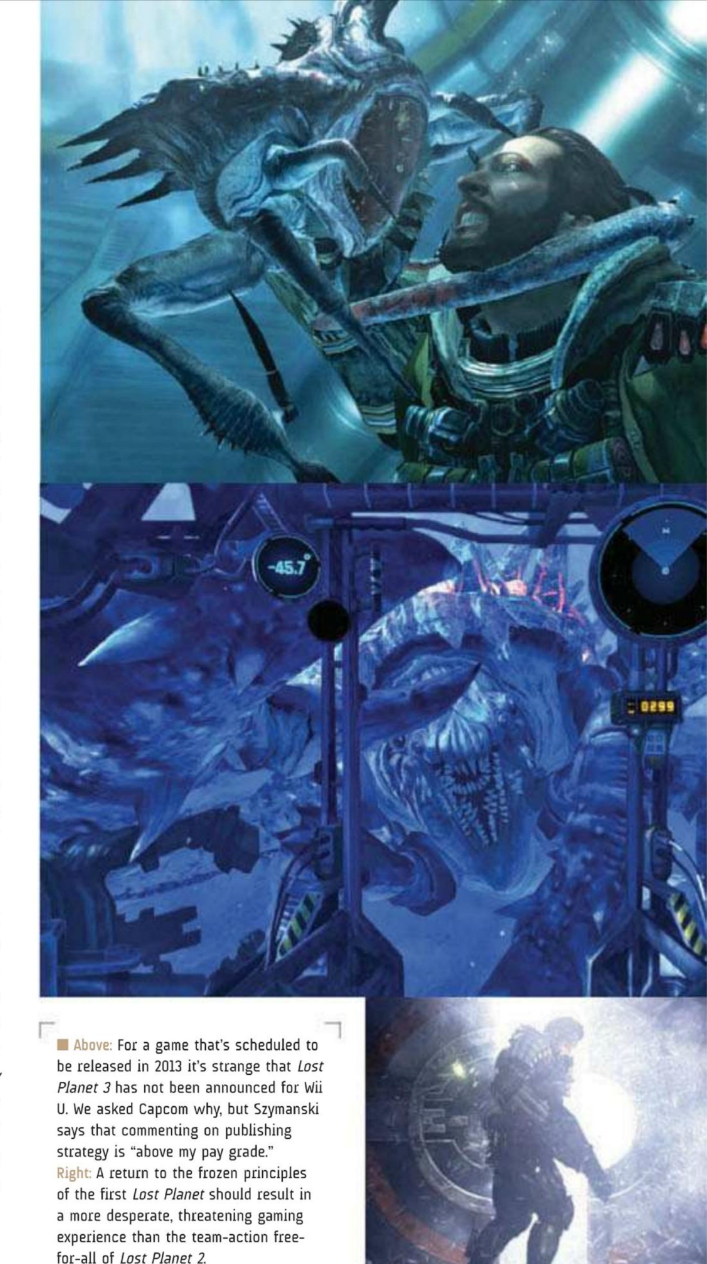
When Jim is attacked during these sections, he's often taken by surprise and will be forced onto his back by the panther-like Akrid. Surviving these attacks is a struggle, represented by a cursor that has to be lined up with the monster's face in order to stab it in the mouth before it bites Jim. The energy in these moments does a great job of making Jim – miles away from the relative safety of his Rig – feel totally vulnerable, like he could be killed at any second.

And that's a vitally important point – not just because of Capcom's penchant for challenging action games, but because Jim is a much more likeable hero than *Lost Planet* has ever seen. Almost like the wisecracking Nathan Drake, he's very easy to like, and as he chats over video screen with his wife back on Earth, he very quickly establishes himself as a character you can care about. And if you feel a connection to that character then the gameplay can only be more immersive and experiential, the horror more horrifying, as a result.

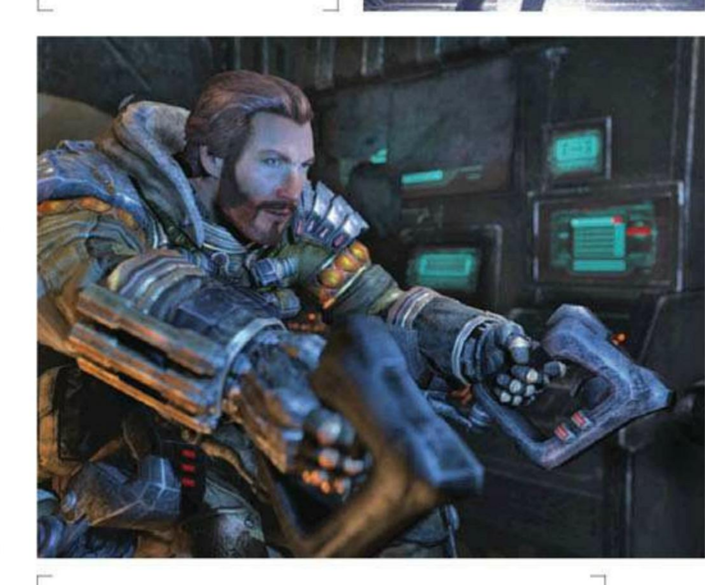
/// It's somewhat remarkable that Capcom has taken a brand like *Lost Planet*, which has always struggled to appeal beyond a loyal niche, and find a way to inject mainstream qualities without detracting from the hardcore experience. That it has done so in collaboration with Spark Unlimited (maker of flops *Legendary* and *Turning Point*) is simply astonishing. How has Capcom turned Spark around so incredibly?

"From the very first day we began this project it was important to us to have a true collaboration," answers Szymanski. "This is a Capcom franchise, it's a Capcom IP. Oguro-san invented the first game and he's been with the franchise throughout, so he more than anyone knows what makes *Lost Planet* what it is. And when he came up with the concept and brought it together with the developer, that's where things really took off. From day one, it's been a constant collaborative process, so we can say that beyond a shadow of a doubt *Lost Planet 3* is very much a Capcom game." Having witnessed the sheer quality of the game for ourselves – from the visuals, to the dialogue, to the original game design ideas – we have to admit that Szymanski is right. If we didn't know any better we'd swear *Lost Planet 3*, based on current evidence, was an in-house Capcom production. And there can't be that many comments that could be more complementary to either a developer or its game.

> "We wanted the single-player campaign to be very character driven, very narrative driven"
> **KENJI OGURO** CAPCOM



Above: For a game that's scheduled to be released in 2013 it's strange that *Lost Planet 3* has not been announced for Wii U. We asked Capcom why, but Szymanski says that commenting on publishing strategy is "above my pay grade."
Right: A return to the frozen principles of the first *Lost Planet* should result in a more desperate, threatening gaming experience than the team-action free-for-all of *Lost Planet 2*.

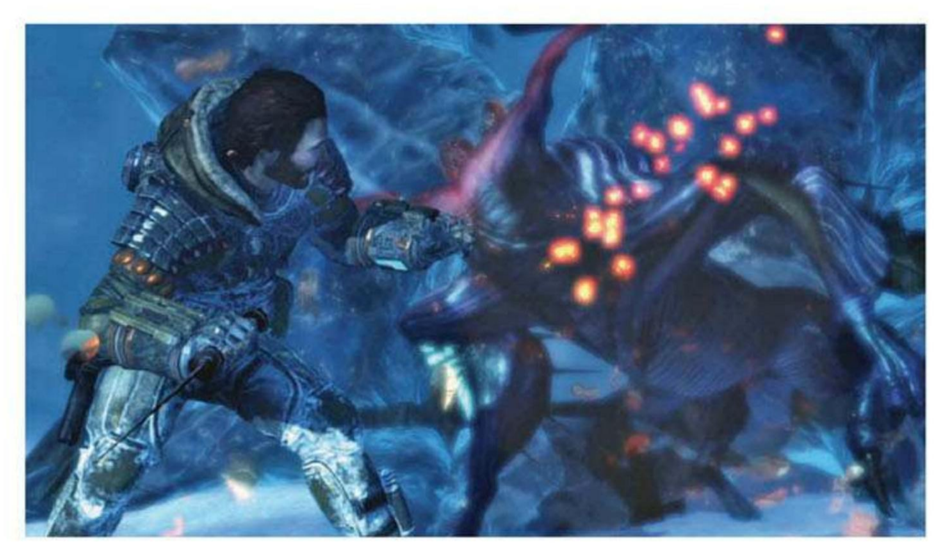


Above: Despite this press image, all Rig gameplay is viewed in first-person in order to "accentuate the scale of the rig and make you feel like you're piloting a nice big meaty machine," says Oguro.



IT'S LIFE, JIM…

SZYMANSKI FURTHER outlines *Lost Planet 3*'s plot… "Jim is told that he's among the first group of humans to land on the planet, but there's some intrigue later on about whether that's actually true or not. The first goal he's been given is to take thermal energy, the natural resource of the planet, and find a way to utilise it. A good analogy would be the gold rush – that idea that everyone flocks to a natural resource thinking they can exploit it. So Jim is part of that group and he's there to build the colony and work in a hazardous place so he can support his family back on earth. Through the course of the game we see Jim go on this journey from being a labourer to getting wrapped up in all the intrigue and mystery."





Above: *Lost Planet 3*'s melee combat sequences skirt dangerously close to QTE territory, but they do a great job of making you feel one mistake away from being gobbled up by an alien.
Left: Can you tell where the weak spot is? For all its changes from game to game, *Lost Planet*'s boss battles still very much evoke a classic arcade feel in line with Capcom's coin-op heritage. But that's no bad thing. Nobody does boss battles better.



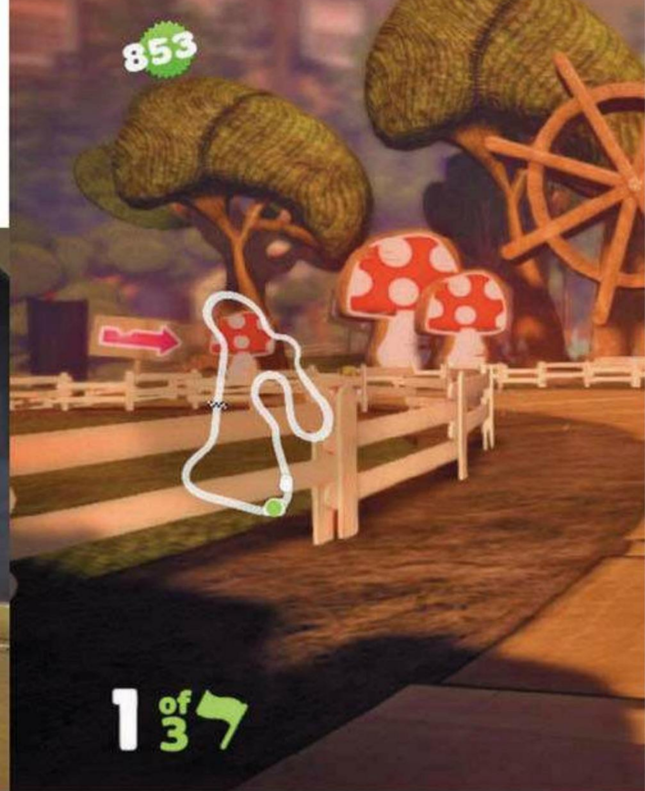




SNOW BROTHER

KENJI OGURO may not be the most famous name to emerge from the halls of Capcom but he's certainly a pivotal one, having created the original *Lost Planet* in 2007 and overseen the franchise as a whole ever since. "To tell you the truth, *Lost Planet 3* is the closest we've come to my original vision for *Lost Planet*," he says during the game's initial presentation. To this end, we ask him which original addition to *Lost Planet 3* he's most pleased with. "The thing I like most," he answers, "is that by placing the game in the past we're able to use the utility rig rather than the vital suits. Not only does it look cool and match the new setting but it also introduces some fun, interesting gameplay that wasn't in the previous two *Lost Planet* games. So I think it's a really good amalgamation of visual history and gameplay."





Above: Plenty of *LittleBigPlanet Karting* will be familiar to fans of its platforming counterpart. Players will still be able to customise characters with various costumes and wacky accessories, with a similar setup for vehicle customisation. Below: There's a battle mode included, just so you don't forget that, fundamentally, you're palying *Mario Kart*.



LITTLEBIGPLANET VITA

AT E3 2011, Developer Double11 was revealed to be working on that latest handheld spin-off to the *LittleBigPlanet* franchise, heading to Sony's new handheld, PS Vita. Initial reactions were strong; an organic transition of the fundamental ideas behind the series – namely, the ability to create levels using the portable console's touchscreen controls – and a huge amount of features from its PlayStation 3 counterpart would remain accessible. It was thought to be a launch game for the device but a tentative release date has turned into a vague TBA – we're none the wiser as to when we'll finally see it. Coincidently, a *ModNation Racers* spin-off is currently available for PS Vita. Oh, that's right, you don't care.

LittleBigPlanet Karting

CONCEPT Sackboy makes his third-dimension debut with a franchise spin-off that introduces the series' staple comprehensive creation tools to the racing genre.

The ultimate sack race

When games™ interviewed Naughty Dog's Justin Richmond late last year, we were pretty confident we knew what the studio had planned for its follow-up to *Uncharted 3*. *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak And Daxter* established a successful business model: three main instalments concluded by a karting spin-off. In our mind, *Unkarted* (the ingenious title we proposed) was set as firmly as Nathan Drake's quiff. As it transpires, we were looking for our cross-pollinated kart title in completely the wrong place.

So you're Sony and you need a mascot to front a jovial new *Mario Kart*-style racer – where do you turn? Well, to someone family friendly, iconic and patriotic enough to bleed PlayStation colours (if such identifiable colours existed and if said character's insides didn't consist solely of soft wool). Unsurprisingly, Sackboy – the plush star of *LittleBigPlanet* and poster-boy for Sony's community-driven 'Play, Create, Share' endeavours – is the obvious choice to take centre-stage in Sony's new racing game. But who's behind the wheel? Well, that'll be United Front Games, working in conjunction with franchise creator Media Molecule on the spin-off.

We've been here before, though. *ModNation Racers* – the studio's first and only release to date – was a customisable racer full of colourful characters and creation tools for the community to tinker with and share online. But let's be clear about this right away: *LittleBigPlanet Karting* is not *ModNation Racers* reskinned. It's an opportunity for United Front to do for racing what *LittleBigPlanet* did for the platformer. Namely, unshackle players from the confines of the genre it's rooted in.

/// Arguably, that's a little trickier to do with a racer. While the community modded *LittleBigPlanet* and its sequel to conjure six million-or-so iterations of giant calculators, *Space Invaders* clones and top-down tank battles, being confined to a vehicle proves somewhat problematic where abstract expressionism is concerned. What it can do is offer a multitude of driving experiences to create, from the side-on stunt-fuelled antics of a *Trials HD*-style track to objective-focused courses and multiple component pieces for players to click together in whichever way they see fit.

> "Captures the best of classic Karting gameplay, married with the unbridled creativity of LBP"
> JAMES GRIEVE UNITED FRONT GAMES

Concocting imaginative designs for levels, karts, modes and weapons will no doubt be





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: Canada/UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: United Front Games/ Media Molecule
Release: 2012
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

With only one release gracing its CV to date, United Front Games hasn't had chance to fully prove itself, with only the cutesy racer *ModNation Racers* a signifier of the studio's expertise. Still, in London bus style, this year sees two new releases from the studio, with a return to racrers in *LittleBigPlanet Karting* and the long-delayed was-*True-Crime*-now-not open-world crime opus, *Sleeping Dogs*.

Developer History

ModNation Racers **2010 [PS3]**

High Point

ModNation Racers possessed an extensive and comprehensive track editor but wasn't quite the *LittleBigPlanet* on wheels that everyone had hoped it would be. Well, *LittleBigPlanet Karting* should sort that out.

tantalising enough for the majority of the PlayStation's passionate legion of modders to jump on board, but United Front is no slouch either. Among standard races, the game will be littered with boss encounters, track objectives and arena battles, all set against the vibrant backdrop of the franchise's patented world of patchwork fabric-conditioner-television-commercial-style scenery.

Truth be told, it's hard not to feel slightly sceptical towards the *LBP* franchise these days, considering the PSP iteration that felt light on features, the Move DLC that somehow stripped the game of its simplicity and a long overdue PS Vita edition. The signs are pointing towards a franchise being milked dry of its value with little effort to invigorate and progress the series. *LittleBigPlanet Karting* does have the potential to change all that, though. For one, United Front's *ModNation Racers* at least handled adequately, unlike so many other *Mario Kart* clones, so there's very little to worry about in that respect. Secondly, the *LittleBigPlanet* license has certain expectations, and a new toolbox designed for Sackboy's entry into the third-dimension – this being the first *LittleBigPlanet* game to step outside of the original 2D setup – should ensure that it won't just be more of the same for the modding community, offering a fresh challenge for those fertile minds ready to showcase their creative ingenuity.

Ultimately, it might not be the rallying adventures of Nathan Drake, Sully and that woman who looks a lot like Helen Mirren, but then *LittleBigPlanet Karting* is a far more interesting prospect than another cash-grab Naughty Dog franchise-on-wheels would have been – not to mention another coup for PlayStation exclusivity. All that's needed now is a catchier title... we'll be waiting for the call, Sony.

Above: The level design utilises established objects and scenery from the franchise past. You can't say it doesn't look the real deal. Below: This cartoon-style Sackboy looks less like the real thing and more like one of the plastic toys strewn all over the **games**™ office. It's far from the visual detail of the original game.





Above: It won't all just be straight driving, as the game takes established weapons and items for the *LittleBigPlanet* universe and repurposes them in the context of a fast-paced racer. We're hoping clever use of certain items will reward players with shortcuts.

■ With a massive playable area, it only makes sense that gameplay incorporates a number of vehicles. And what kind of action game doesn't feature explosions?



I PREFER TO WORK ALONE

IF THE likes of *DmC* are the spiritual descendants of *Final Fight* and *Streets Of Rage*, then why have none of them ever had a co-op mode? "We did think about it at the very beginning," says US producer Alex Jones, "but I think the story we wanted to tell would feel false unless Dante was alone in the world."

"The thing about Devil May Cry is that it's a stylish action game, where you're trying to show off your moves and wow your friends," adds Motohide Eshiro. "If you were trying to do that while playing with someone else it would get in the way of you doing what you're trying to do." So there you go...

■ Right: This boss reminds us so much of Iron Maiden mascot Eddie that we have to ask if anyone at Ninja Theory is a fan of the London-based heavy metal band. Antoniades says not particularly, but he does have a fun story about Maiden drummer Nicko McBrain (best name ever) inviting him into a sauna. Above: We ask Antoniades if he's sick of comparisons to *Bayonetta* and, surprisingly, he says it doesn't come up that often. He also adds that it never came up during pre-production. "It's pretty clear tonally, story-wise, atmosphere, that we're not trying to compete with *Bayonetta*," says Alex Jones.





DmC Devil May Cry

CONCEPT ■ Seamlessly blending Capcom's stylish action combat with Ninja Theory's platforming and narrative expertise, *DmC* has the potential to be a masterclass in co-development.

Dante must die? Think again...

For a Japanese publisher so intent on cracking the Western market, Capcom sure has a mixed record when it comes to East/West collaborations. Sure, Blue Castle Games did such a good job with *Dead Rising 2* that Capcom bought the developer, but the poor trio of *Bionic Commando*, *Dark Void* and *Operation Raccoon City* show that this has very much been a learning curve for Capcom. In 2012, however, it looks as though the publisher has turned a corner. *Lost Planet 3* seems to have achieved the impossible by squeezing a good game out of Spark Unlimited, while *DmC Devil May Cry* has finally proven that a Western studio can make a hardcore fighting game.

How have they done it? "The best piece of advice Capcom gave us," says Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades, "was 'if the player wants to do something then let them do it without delay.' That applies to everything from instant movement and turning to feedback in the combat, swapping between weapons on the fly. And through that process you open the system up for people to discover things that even you hadn't anticipated. That's a good philosophy."

Capcom producer Motohide Eshiro agrees wholeheartedly. "The most important thing to us was input response with no lag. Players press a button, it happens. Players pull off a combo, it happens. As you know, Capcom is a big producer of fighting games, so input response is very important to us. So that's what we wanted to stress."

Having now played an entire stage of *DmC* ourselves, we can happily confirm that Capcom and Ninja Theory have totally nailed their joint aim. If we didn't already know that Ninja Theory was the developer, we'd guess it was in-house Capcom production, such is its authenticity. Within seconds we'd adapted to the controls like riding a bike, and soon found ourselves comboing sword swipes into launchers, juggling enemies with handguns, hopping up into the air for a few mid-air swipes and then smacking them down to earth as fluidly as we have in any *Devil May Cry* before. Just as Capcom wished, everything we wanted to do happened as soon as our thumbs touched the necessary buttons. Ninja Theory has done right by Dante.

> "We're trying to make the best DMC combat experience possible with a Western take on the world"
>
> TAMEEM ANTONIADES NINJA THEORY

/// Perhaps the greatest endorsement of Ninja Theory's efforts is that the stylish action grading system still works as intended. As our rusty hands began working through the game, we initially racked up a few D and C grades in a row before redoubling our efforts and stringing better combos together in pursuit of a B or A. Only by being imaginative and playful with Dante's combos did we finally earn ourselves an elusive S rank, and the wave of satisfaction that washed over us was all the proof needed that this is yet again a game that rewards practice, skill and personal expression.

That scope for expression – through Dante's flexible repertoire – is what makes *Devil May Cry* shine. So it's encouraging that his repertoire is now bigger than ever. Like *DMC4*'s Nero, Dante now has an extending grasp that can be used to pull enemies toward him, though it's now expanded so that it can be used to pull himself toward an enemy as well, which is useful for getting up toward clusters of flying demons. It's great for keeping mad combos going, as are the new sub-weapons that Dante can switch between mid-combo. YouTube-obsessed show-off players are going to have a field day with the potential of this system, although we are a little concerned that the controls, which now require triggers and shoulder buttons to be held down to swap out which weapon the face buttons control, may confuse newcomers. Though that's hopefully a problem that will diminish with practice. And if that's the biggest concern with the finished game then we can be certain that *DmC* will be a very deserving addition to the *Devil May Cry* series.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Ninja Theory
Release: 2012
Players: 1

Motohide Eshiro Profile

As a co-production between Ninja Theory and Capcom, *DmC* needs an experienced producer, and has it in Motohide Eshiro. Though he's never worked on a *DMC* game, his experience on high-profile Capcom games makes him a safe bet.

Motohide Eshiro History

Okamiden **2010 [DS]**
Shadow Of Rome **2005 [PS2]**
Onimusha: Warlords **2001 [PS2]**
Three Wonders **1991 [Multi]**

High Point

Eshiro has worked on some big Capcom franchises, but his work on *Ace Attorney* is sure to earn him the most kudos.





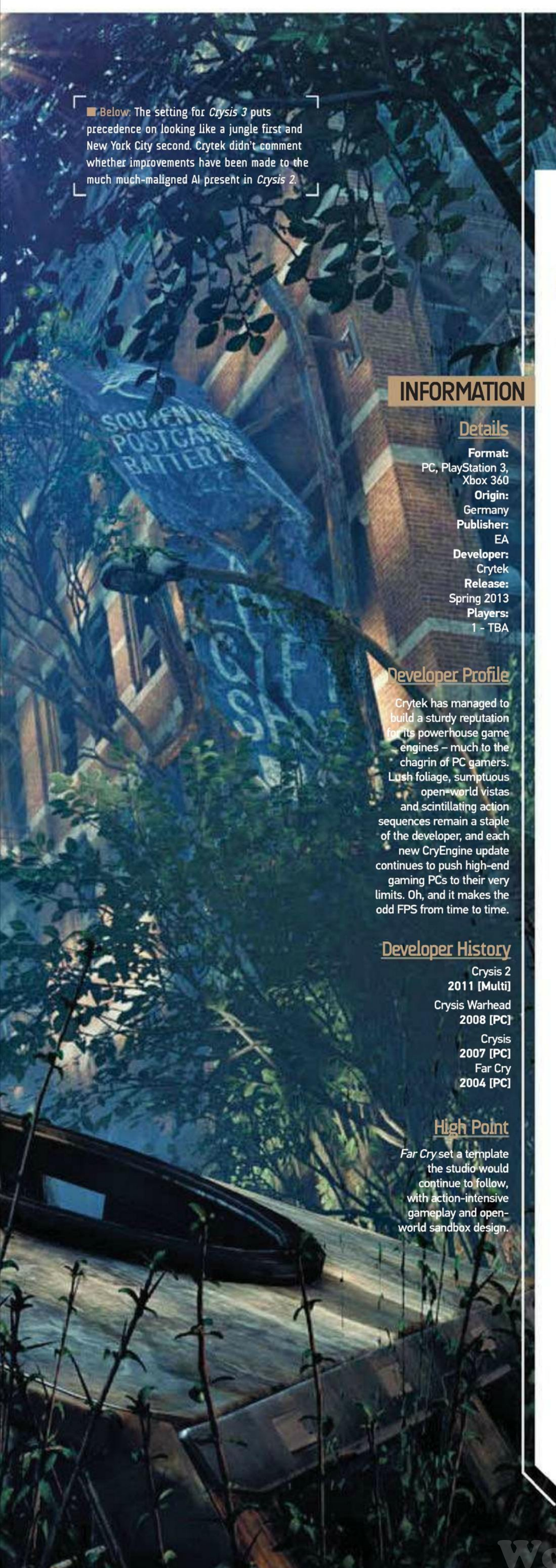
■ Left: Ninja Theory believes it has a responsibility to make *Devil May Cry* more accessible to the West, which is why *DmC* has a greater narrative focus to better explain the setting and characters. This won't come at the expense of combat, thankfully.



PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

COUPLED WITH the announcement of *Crysis 3* came a full-on bombardment of exclusive pre-order bonuses that eager patrons can expect when placing their early orders. Each of the three packs – Stalker, Overkill and Predator – feature slight advancements in the multiplayer, unlocking dog tags, jumping up levels and gaining early access to some of the game's most powerful weapons. It all feels a little dirty, offering slight tactical advantages over your online combatants, but in an age where pre-order bonuses have become standard and ever more grandiose, it's relatively restrained compared to the usual splurge or exclusive costumes, weapons and content unlocks for early adopters. Hopefully Crytek UK will find time off from working on *Homefront 2* and return on multiplayer duties.

■ Right: While Prophet will be constantly armed with a bow and arrow, other more standard means of destruction remain. For instance, the new rifle – Typhoon – fires 500 rounds per second. Why? Who cares?



■ Below: The setting for *Crysis 3* puts precedence on looking like a jungle first and New York City second. Crytek didn't comment whether improvements have been made to the much much-maligned AI present in *Crysis 2*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Germany
Publisher: EA
Developer: Crytek
Release: Spring 2013
Players: 1 - TBA

Developer Profile

Crytek has managed to build a sturdy reputation for its powerhouse game engines – much to the chagrin of PC gamers. Lush foliage, sumptuous open-world vistas and scintillating action sequences remain a staple of the developer, and each new CryEngine update continues to push high-end gaming PCs to their very limits. Oh, and it makes the odd FPS from time to time.

Developer History

Crysis 2
2011 [Multi]
Crysis Warhead
2008 [PC]
Crysis
2007 [PC]
Far Cry
2004 [PC]

High Point

Far Cry set a template the studio would continue to follow, with action-intensive gameplay and open-world sandbox design.

Crysis 3

CONCEPT ■ Crytek's series returns with further emphasis on advanced weaponry and superhuman abilities in another dazzling vision of our miserable future.

The urban jungle, redefined

It's hard to pinpoint exactly where the *Crysis* franchise fits into the grand pantheon of contemporary first-person shooters – a potent concoction of *System Shock*, *Far Cry* and *Halo*, amalgamated into a hybrid blaster that has so far failed to align with mainstream tastes. Nevertheless, it seems to have garnered attention through a sterling reputation – one intensely focused on its aesthetic muscle rather than the merits of how it actually functions as a competent action game.

With *Crysis 2*, Crytek pushed itself into new territory, deciding to explore the dense urban jungle of New York City rather than fall back on another sunbathed island. Yet, by turning its attention to this big city spectacle, it effectively undermined many of the fundamental tropes of the German studio's illustrious back catalogue. Where's the patented sandbox environment? Why doesn't any of this make sense? And where's the ruddy eye-massaging tropical backdrops?

Crysis 3 at least rectifies one of those transgressions. While New York remains the primary locale, the alien invasion that ravaged Earth twenty-four years previous in *Crysis 2* (turning most of the world into an uninhabitable wasteland) has forced government forces to enclose major cities in eco-bubbles, reigniting organic life and cultivating an ecosystem. The urban sprawl has turned into an actual jungle.

// It creates a subtle fusion of design elements plucked from the original *Crysis* and its 2011 sequel, enabling level design to stretch beyond a bland snapshot of the famous conurbation. Instead, lush, vibrant greenery proliferates across dilapidated buildings; it's in our first taste of gameplay that we land squarely amid the swampy ruins of Chinatown – representing one of the seven distinct tropical zones known in the game as the Seven Wonders. With this malleable facsimile at its disposal, Crytek has returned to the sandbox origins of *Crysis*, rather than the more linear structure of its successor. As director of creative development Rasmus Hojengaard explains, a return to open environments proved a monumental task for the team.

"Sometimes there is validity to going along a linear path," he says, "because you want the player to be in a certain place at a certain time for epic moments, and so on. Then at other points you want to broaden out and ensure there are a ton of options and potential presented to players, and it's up to you to figure out what you want to do. Each approach has validity, and what we want to avoid now is that we do one or the other fully. So it's going to have a lot of curving – for example, if you're going to have a really strong story moment it's going to be more linear."

Sticking with the story, *Crysis 2*'s gracious attempt at weaving an engrossing sci-fi narrative failed to live up to its promises - quickly spiralling into a convoluted and nonsensical barrage of ideas. Crytek is currently keeping mum on story details for this new sequel, but what we have seen points towards a more streamlined tale. Returning hero Prophet takes a trip back to New York City in a cut-and-dry story of revenge and retribution, coming up against both agents of Cell and alien Ceph – the latter having evolved into multiple new enemy types, including new flame-wielding Scorchers.

> "To do big, open-world gameplay you have to really think ahead about how people are going to approach it"
> RASMUS HOJENGAARD CRYTEK

This new Rambo-like approach is also represented through *Crysis 3*s arsenal. While inevitable Nanosuit augmentations will provide the hi-tech upgrades that will offer the edge in battle, Prophet's primary means of dispatch is a surprisingly rudimentary bow and arrow combo, enabling players to, among other things, execute silent long-range stealth kills while cloaked.

And given that the whole game world is now a thriving jungle, full of hopping toads, exotic birds and plenty of natural cover, it may just be that the *Crysis* franchise will finally engage stealth gameplay with all the gusto injected into the action. Even if that turns out not to be the case, at least one thing is for certain: it'll sure look pretty.

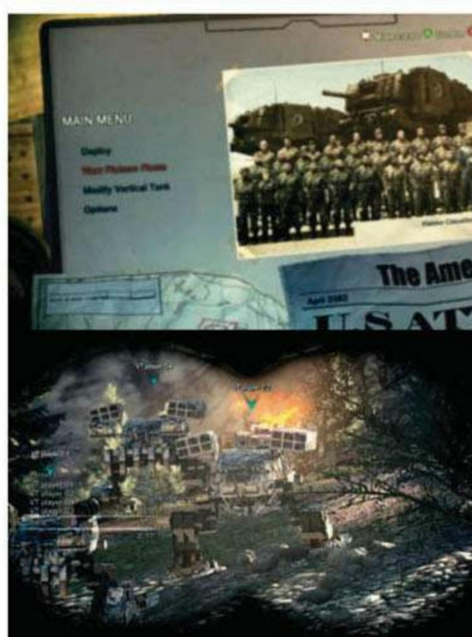
ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY?

OVER A YEAR after release there are still very few Kinect games you can play sitting down, and even fewer that combine with pad controls. We ask Kitabayashi why that is. "I think people might have been cursed with preconceptions," he muses. "So they've got it in mind that you play Kinect standing up, when the truth is that you don't have to.

"At the time of our announcement," he adds, "the Kinect libraries were not compatible with a sit-down style of play. So we told Microsoft, 'Look, we're going to assume that you'll make this happen.' We gave Microsoft a list of all the things we wanted to do and basically told them that we assumed they would all be supported by the time the game was finished, and Microsoft delivered."

■ Above: As well as the single-player campaign, *Heavy Armor* supports Xbox Live for separate co-op and versus missions. You're not in the same VT, though, so no hope of splitting command duties between pad and Kinect controls.





■ Left: Die in a co-op game and you return as a ghost, able to ride around on someone else's VT and wave your ethereal arms around using Kinect.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: From Software
Release: 22 June
Players: 1 (2-4 online)

Developer Profile

Though From Software gained popular notoriety with recent releases of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, the developer is known for more than just ridiculously difficult RPGs. It also makes ridiculously difficult giant robot games!

Developer History

Chromehounds **2006 [Xbox 360]**
A.C.E Another Century's Episode **2005 [PS2]**
Metal Wolf Chaos **2004 [Xbox]**
Armored Core **1997 [PSone]**

High Point

From Software has truly honed its craft, but *Metal Wolf Chaos*, in which you play a mech-armoured president, stands out.

Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor

CONCEPT ■ From Software and Capcom team up to make the first Kinect-controlled mech sim. Hands up if you like the sound of that.

In which we get in a flap over Kinect (again)

When Microsoft secretly announced Project Natal [now Kinect] to publishers, we saw the concept and immediately thought of *Steel Battalion*," says Capcom producer Tatsuya Kitabayashi. "It was a conscious strategic decision because we were certain that other publishers were going to concentrate on casual party games with Kinect, so we always wanted to go hardcore on it."

Hardcore is definitely the word for it. The original *Steel Battalion* used its own custom controller, complete with yokes, throttles, pedals and about a trillion (at a rough estimate) buttons, knobs and switches. Just mastering the controls was an art form, and that was before you got to devilish little game mechanics like the permadeath function that wiped your save if you happened to still be in a mech when it exploded. 'How exactly does Capcom expect this most challenging of games to work on a controller like Kinect?' we immediately thought. And now we know…

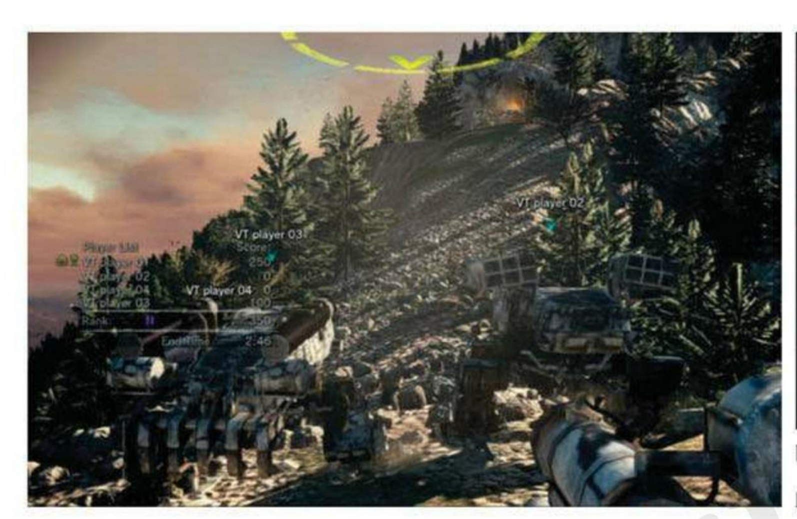
In practice, *Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor* is both a significant accomplishment for Kinect and a slight disappointment for fans of Capcom's series. In many ways the implementation really impresses. You can play the whole game sitting down – except for when you have to stand up to pop your head out of the hatch of your Vertical Tank – and you control the game with a combination of traditional joypad inputs and Kinect gestures. Both of these qualities are rare in Kinect games, and the hard work Capcom and developer From Software has put in to getting them working definitely shows.

As you'd expect, movement of your VT, aiming and firing of its weapons are all handled by the 360 control pad, while all the other functions that make *Steel Battalion* such an immersive sim are handled by Kinect. There's a huge array of buttons to press and levers to pull, and they're all necessary to gameplay. Fiddling around with the controls, usually in the panic of battle, has a satisfying feel to it, and you do feel like you're getting to grips with a complicated, demanding vehicle… at least when Kinect recognises what you're trying to do, anyway.

/// Kitabayashi advises us to make precise movements with Kinect instead of overcompensating (as can be the instinctive thing to do with motion controllers), and he's mostly right. For many of the gestures we have no problem whatsoever. Pulling levers works. Swiping to look around 360 degrees works. Holding a hand up to out face to use binoculars… works! But pushing buttons? For some reason Kinect seems to struggle with movements made directly forward, and is so unwilling to recognise our virtua button presses that we find ourselves angrily jabbing the air in desperation. Eventually, our jabs are registered, of course, but that delay could mean the difference between victory and defeat in *Steel Battalion*'s world. The demo mission we play is like the Normandy landings, the spectre of death riding every bullet and shell. Messing up under such difficult conditions can and will cost you your life, and it just feels unfair when it's the fault of the hardware and not your own reflexes. Which is all a bit of a shame because – control issues aside – this appears to be a well-made mech game, with interesting missions and a great sense of style.

> "When it comes to mech action games and system implementation, From Software is second to none"
> TATSUYA KITABAYASHI CAPCOM

It's unlikely that these issues will be resolved so close to *Heavy Armor*'s release, but not all hope is lost. There is a period of adjustment to the controls – we realised partway into the demo that you didn't need to let go of the 360 pad to make the thrusting movement required to grasp the VT's controls, for example – so it's possible that Kinect's frustrations will ease over an extended period of time as you become accustomed to its foibles. And there's always a chance that the designers will tailor the missions around Kinect's capabilities, going easy on you where necessary. With From Software on development duties, however, that may be an unrealistic hope.





■ Above: We asked Kitabayashi what he wants from Kinect 2. Individual finger detection and hologram projectors, he said. "Good for dating games," we replied – to which he mimed a huge hug.

■ Below: Arkane Studios cites London of the 1940s as the main visual inspiration for *Dishonored*. Winding alleyways, foggy, cobbled streets and more than a helping of noxious disease goes some way to bear this out. Right: The work of Viktor Antonov, who designed *Half-Life 2*'s iconic City 17, is immediately recognisable in *Dishonored*'s architecture and bipedal Strider robots.



CROSSING OVER

FINALLY CANNED in 2009 due to financial concerns (and before the developer fell to Bethesda Pac-Manning its way through the purchase of indies), Arkane Studios was working on an FPS that would fuse single-player and multiplayer gameplay. That angle itself is perhaps of less interest – just think about *Brink*'s spectacular failure in this regard. What *is* important, however, is the cancelled game's setting – a modern day dystopian Paris on the brink of governmental collapse, and a parallel city in which the Knights Templar took power in the 12th century. Arkane has clearly been wishing to mix political intrigue against a supernatural backdrop for quite some time, and it's easy to believe many well-established ideas have made their way into *Dishonored*.

■ Above: No 'adult' videogame is complete without its share of prostitutes, but the Dickensian grime and Mervyn Peake-like visual grotesquery of this scene offers the potential to tell a more involved story than many.





Dishonored

CONCEPT In a call and response to Irrational's phenomenally successful *BioShock* saga, a *System Shock* alumnus resurfaces with a similarly atmosphere-driven shooter in a world that could prove to be even darker.

I see your BioShock, and I raise you Thief

Harvey Smith feels more and more like a less celebrated Ken Levine. Both have worked on classic videogame series, the instalments of which lurk in the mechanically complex past of the PC's classic FPS heritage. While Smith and Levine both worked on *System Shock*, that series was the one the Irrational founder chose to reboot for a more accessible console legacy. Smith, on the other hand, seems to have chosen his work on *Thief* as an entry point. Perhaps he feels like more authentically replicating the involved, stealth-based style and unforgiving, Gothic mood that characterised that series, rather than pandering to traditional FPS tropes in the way that allowed *BioShock* to really make its name on console. But what both Smith and Levine seem to agree on, even before considering what a player does in a space, is what the world is, and why they're actually there. It's this sense of time, place and atmosphere that *Dishonored*, like Levine's Rapture before it, seems to place at the forefront.

It's easy enough to accuse developer Arkane Studios of hiding behind *Dishonored*'s art style as the big pull, of course; since its announcement last summer, the developer has still flatly refused to show more than mere snippets of gameplay in action. But as details of the world spill out of the team's Lyon headquarters, it's becoming harder and harder to believe that, in a location so accomplished in its fiction and its visuals, there's going to be anything less than epic adventure to play out.

/// Wisely, Arkane has already limited itself to a single location, and Dunwall is its name. The fantasy city is a gritty fusion of 1940s London architecture and the steampunk sensibilities of artist Viktor Antonov – who brought us *Half-Life 2*'s City 17 and its related Orwellian social horrors. An imperialistic metropolis of skyline-dominating steel fortresses, Dunwall would be bleak at the best of times – but that's before the added inconveniences of plague and, for player character Corvo, being fitted up for the murder of the city's Empress.

It's an oft-told story, perhaps; the people's hero – tooled up with supernatural skills and a generous armoury – is on the run from the very lawkeepers he used to lead. But like *Thief*, passage through *Dishonored* promises to offer little in the way of compromise. Stealth, cunning and picking the right battles at the right time seems to be the gameplay angle, and Arkane plans to reward the commitment of players with an environment that'll be a far more energetic sandbox playground than the average shooter.

Verticality, apparently, will be one of the keys to this freedom, as Arkane describes a world structure in which Corvo will spend as much of his time climbing buildings as skulking around or through them. At the same time, peering through keyholes and stealth killing will contribute to gameplay that, like thief, rewards the cautious. And the game's 'Chaos' feature could prove to be its genuine, forward-moving trump card in this area.

Details are still sketchy, but Smith has discussed the dynamic as being like a quiet checklist the game keeps of all of individual elements of Corvo's behaviour that could destabilise Dunwall, with the idea that too much social disturbance could seriously unravel what remains of the city's sociopolitical fabric.

> "Decide your approach for each mission, and the outcomes will change as a result"
> OFFICIAL DISHONORED WEBSITE

And that, perhaps, is a binary representation of Corvo's choice: sneak around manipulating and affecting others – using powers such as the ability to possess creatures to do his bidding – or rely more on a personal level of raw skill to get by. With athletic powers such as double-jumps or a near-distance teleport known as the 'Blink', Corvo is more than capable of slipping by on his own. But it's the wider potential for Machiavellian intrigue in such an affecting and atmospherically charged sandbox that seems to be *Dishonored*'s real temptation.

Until Arkane is willing to show any of this in action, however, it's all theoretical. But can an assembled force of *Thief*, *System Shock*, *Deus Ex* and *Half-Life 2* names be wrong?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: France
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Arkane Studios
Release: September 2012
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

From *Wing Commander* to *Ultima* to *Deus Ex*, Harvey Smith's track record is undoubtedly impressive. Even a brief blip at Midway, in which he blamed development scheduling for spoiling *BlackSite: Area 51* can do little to tarnish the developer's otherwise sterling reputation.

Developer History

Thief: Deadly Shadows **2004 [Multi]**
Deus Ex **2000 [Multi]**
Ultima VIII: Pagan **1994 [Multi]**
Wing Commander **1990 [Multi]**

High Point

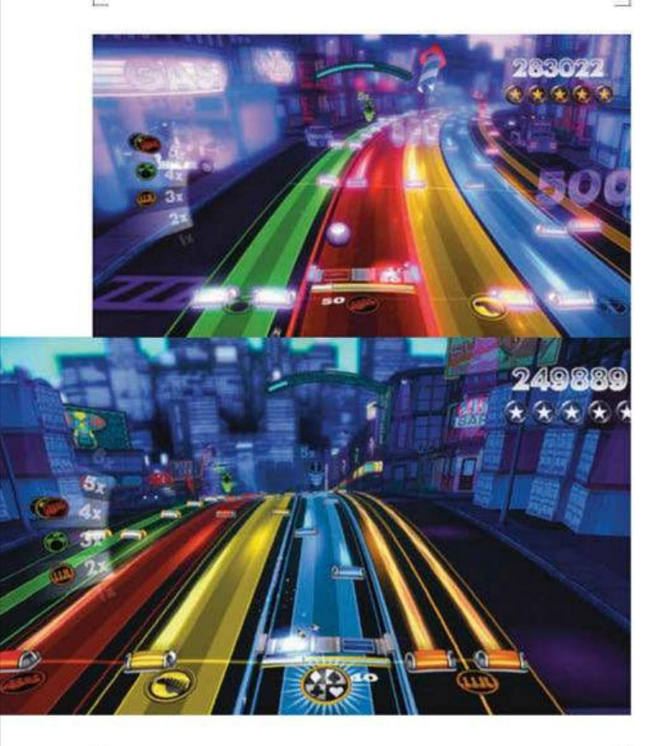
None can argue with *Deus Ex* which, while considered Warren Spector's baby more than any, is clearly the product of everybody who worked on it.

Rock Band Blitz

CONCEPT Harmonix chooses the Penny Arcade Expo to announce its return to traditional rhythm-action, with backup from the entire *Rock Band* catalogue.

The man at the PAX said everyone attack

Above: The coloured streaks on note tracks give a quick visual representation of which are in greatest need of your attention in order to keep multipliers evened out. Above: Hey Harmonix, how about releasing a DLC package of the best tunes from *FreQuency* and *Amplitude* to really sweeten this lovely deal? Go on. Thanks.



Above: *Rock Band*'s usual star-based scoring system returns, with the best runs rewarded with five gold stars for all of your online friends and rivals to see and envy.

It's saddening to think that many gamers think of Harmonix purely as 'those guys that made *Rock Band*'. In truth, the US rhythm-action specialist has a far more celebrated and illustrious past. Its role in developing the original *Guitar Hero* changed an entire genre almost overnight and, even before the plastic guitar revolution, the studio made a name for itself with some of the finest traditional examples of music-infused gaming in *FreQuency* and *Amplitude*. And now, with the bottom having fallen out of the peripheral market – whether due to the rise of motion control or simply due to the fact that most gamers have mountains of plastic tat gathering dust – Harmonix is returning to its roots. Those that played the superb PS2 duo will no doubt be scanning the images scattered about these pages only to find their minds emptied of all but Garbage's 'Cherry Lips'. Don't worry, this is perfectly normal. But while *Blitz* is definitely reminiscent of *Amplitude* from a purely visual standpoint, its mechanics feel worlds apart from the hardcore finger workouts of yesteryear.

To those that conquered *Amplitude*'s gruelling Brutal and Insane difficulties, many of *Blitz*'s design decisions seem initially at odds with the core tenets of classic score attack play. There's apparently only one difficulty setting where usually you might expect to find four or five that cater to players of all skill levels; each instrument is simplified down to just two gems per track, the mind-blowing complexity of Pro instruments but a distant memory; permanent No Fail mode means you'll never miss a big rock ending, no matter how poorly you perform, and even missing notes and phrases won't harm your score multipliers. So yeah, much has changed since *Amplitude* (and more recently *Rock Band Unplugged* for PSP), but before you run to the hills, know at least that each of these apparent simplifications works surprisingly well in the context of *Blitz*'s new system.

> "No instrument peripherals required: it's just you, the music, and a controller"
> PRESS RELEASE HARMONIX

/// Previous games employed a mechanic where instruments and tracks could be 'locked in' for a brief time after a perfect sequence, but *Blitz* evolves this into something more freeform. There's no penalty for simply jumping between tracks to hit phrases you like and/or can manage – if anything, the game



TAKE THE POWER BACK

TAKING CUES from *Amplitude*, *Rock Band Blitz* will have its own array of crazy power-ups to make huge scores that much more attainable. Bottle Rockets can be fired off to clear note blocks further down the highway and the Bandmate gimmick can be used to automatically play any instrument for a while, but the best we've seen so far is an ingenious take on *Breakout*. The note catcher becomes the paddle and a large ball is summoned, automatically scoring any note gems it hits as it ricochets around the highway while you jump between tracks frantically to keep it in play. With leaderboards so integral to the score attack nature of the game, we just hope that power-ups are either well-balanced or fixed in their appearance – there'd be nothing worse than having a great run soiled by pick-ups while middling runs hit higher scores through sheer luck.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Harmonix
Release: Q2 2012
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

As the first name in rhythm-action, Harmonix's purchase by Viacom subsidiary MTV in 2006 came as no surprise. That the firm should be dropped so soon as the bubble burst, however, was less expected. Harmonix lives on independently, funded by the success of *Dance Central* and *Rock Band*'s DLC model.

Developer History

Dance Central **2010 [Xbox 360]**
Rock Band Unplugged **2009 [PSP]**
Rock Band **2007 [Multi]**
Guitar Hero **2005 [PlayStation 2]**
Frequency **2001 [PlayStation 2]**

High Point

Rock Band 3 is easily the pinnacle of social rhythm-action, even if the sales figures don't exactly mirror its quality.

rewards this more than ever. Each instrument now has its own multiplier, which increases (but never decreases) based on how many patterns you nail. But in order to stop players sitting on a simple riff for an entire song and maxing out scores easily, multipliers can only grow a few steps larger than the lowest on the board – leave the drums alone, for example, and that basic 1x modifier will cap the other tracks, but spread your attention across all instruments equally and score potential goes through the roof. Like searching for the optimum Star Power activation points in the early days of *Guitar Hero*, working out the best times to upgrade each instrument will be a critical factor in chasing leaderboard supremacy, though *Blitz* is hardly a game left wanting when it comes to longevity.

You see, Harmonix isn't just using the *Rock Band* branding as a way of getting its new peripheral-free game noticed (not that doing so would be especially wise anyway, after *Rock Band 3* sold all of 17 copies). Existing fans of the band games that have forked out for *Rock Band* DLC will be delighted to hear that any downloaded tunes will be playable in *Blitz* from day one, potentially turning the game's modest line-up of 20-plus tunes into a four-figure track list if you've hammered your credit card hard enough. Equally awesome is the news that all of *Blitz*'s songs will be playable in *Rock Band 3* – even if you were never to fire up the game itself, this revelation would at worst make *Blitz* the platform's cheapest song pack by no small margin. Harmonix has come from out of nowhere, then, to serve up one of the year's most exciting downloadable games and find an ingenious way to give back to long-term fans of Harmonix's output and *Rock Band* enthusiasts alike. Now that's what we call an encore.



Above: The start of each new phrase is flagged up with the multiplier you stand to earn from nailing it. Don't mess it up.
Below: A handful of control options offer both original schemes and ones that should be more familiar to seasoned FreQs.

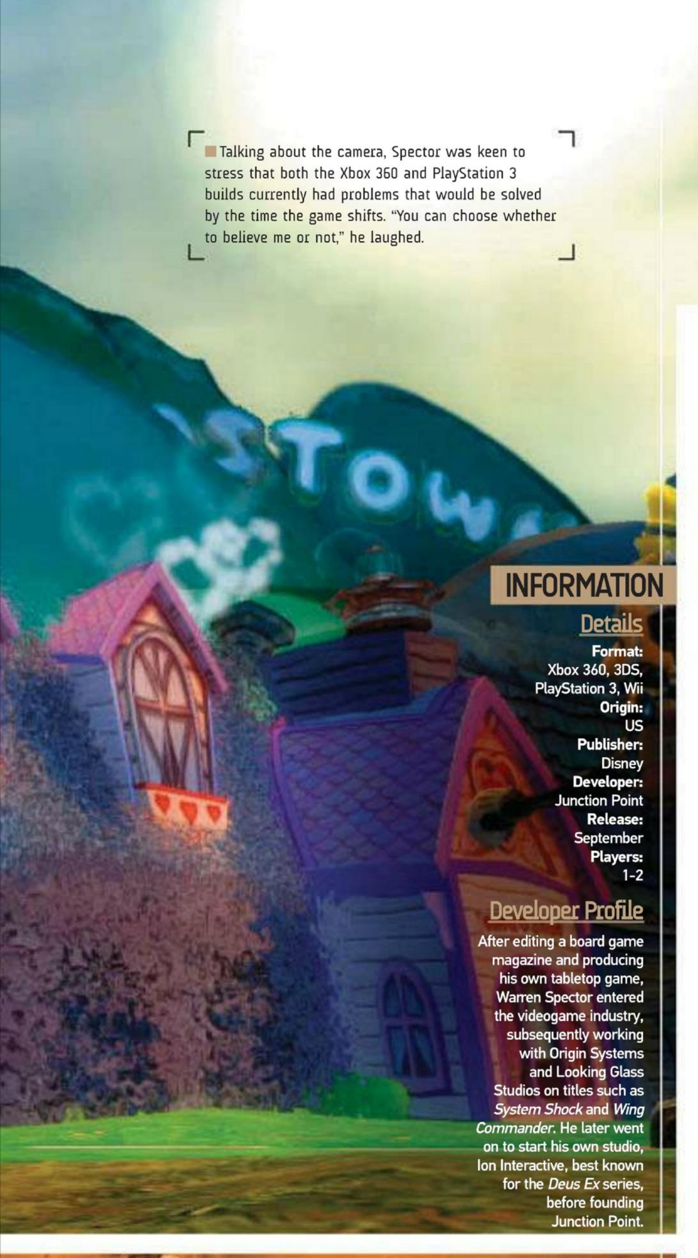


THE POWER OF ILLUSION

ALONGSIDE THE announcement of Junction Point's sequel to the original *Epic Mickey*, a 3DS spin-off, *Epic Mickey: The Power Of Illusion*, is in the works, by *Henry Hatsworth* developer, Dreamrift. While Spector couldn't say much – "All I can do is say, yeah, we're doing a 3DS version and we'll be talking about it soon" – we do know that it will be a side-scrolling sequel to the original *Castle Of Illusion* featuring hand-drawn sprites, and will revisit classic Disney movies (*Sleeping Beauty* and *Tangled* to name a couple). Players will trace items in and out of existence, with accuracy affecting performance; a badly drawn object could harm non-enemies around the environment. It's an announcement for many that'll prove more exciting than news of its console counterpart.

Below: The opening of the game is based around The Sorcerer's Apprentice, but there doesn't seem to be a huge amount of relevance to the reference.

Above: Surely *Epic Mickey 2* would make more sense as a showcase for Nintendo's Wii U? Spector replied with an evasive, "no comment" accompanied by an enormous grin.



Talking about the camera, Spector was keen to stress that both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 builds currently had problems that would be solved by the time the game shifts. "You can choose whether to believe me or not," he laughed.

Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two



Epic to the power of two

CONCEPT Warren Spector's love letter to Disney receives a sequel and invites two players to save the world of forgotten cartoons.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, 3DS, PlayStation 3, Wii
Origin: US
Publisher: Disney
Developer: Junction Point
Release: September
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

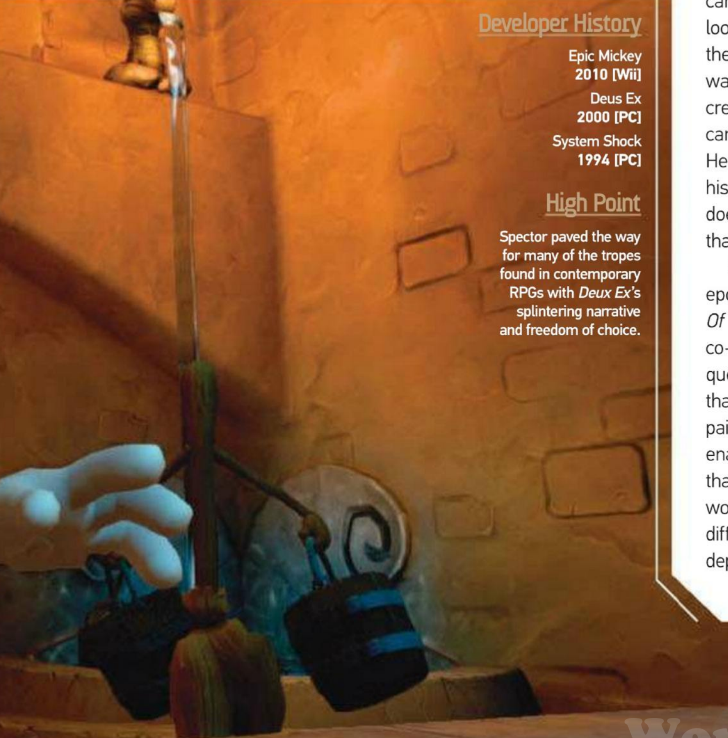
After editing a board game magazine and producing his own tabletop game, Warren Spector entered the videogame industry, subsequently working with Origin Systems and Looking Glass Studios on titles such as *System Shock* and *Wing Commander*. He later went on to start his own studio, Ion Interactive, best known for the *Deus Ex* series, before founding Junction Point.

Developer History

Epic Mickey **2010 [Wii]**
Deus Ex **2000 [PC]**
System Shock **1994 [PC]**

High Point

Spector paved the way for many of the tropes found in contemporary RPGs with *Deux Ex's* splintering narrative and freedom of choice.



Ironically, the majority of players who bought the original *Epic Mickey* may have overlooked the importance of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Walt Disney's first cartoon creation and progenitor to Mickey Mouse was lost among the archives at NBC Universal long after Uncle Walt was fired from the company, spending eighty years in darkness before being unearthed and later reclaimed by Disney. Throughout the twenty-odd cartoons starring the tenacious rabbit, the humour was distinctly offbeat in nature: early cartoons depict an impish and submissive toon who one moment twists the head off a chicken like a cookie jar to reach the eggs inside and the next contorts his own facial features to disguise himself as a chimp. While Mickey is always a black-and-white character, it's Oswald that will bring the true colour to *Epic Mickey 2*.

"Well, he is a mischievous little guy," smiles Warren Spector, president and creative director at Junction Point. "We watched all the old Oswald cartoons, read all the scripts and looked at all the storyboards, and the funny thing is, it was like Walt was a game designer. It's crazy; he created a character whose abilities in the actual cartoons make him the perfect game avatar. He can pop his leg off and scratch his head, pull his arm off and throw it like a boomerang – he does all this in the cartoon. You think Link did that first? No, Walt did that first with Oswald."

> "The funny thing is, it was like Walt was a game designer"
> WARREN SPECTOR JUNCTION POINT

Promoted to co-lead status with the eponymous mouse, *Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two* features drop-in/drop-out split-screen co-op with Oswald assisting Mickey on his quest to save Wasteland one again. Rather than endowing Oswald with another magical paintbrush, he's instead given a device that enables him to unleash an electronic surge that can be aimed at different machinery. It works similarly to Mickey's brush: point it at different interactive hotspots and trigger events depending on the context. It can lift a barrier, activate a door or send a platform moving across the environment. It has also enabled Junction Point to expand the scope of puzzles on offer, with players using both Mickey and Oswald to solve problems together with two separate abilities – along with Oswald's Sonic-and-Tails-style team ability to turn his ears into an impromptu helicopter and hover Mickey to unreachable areas. In the traditional spirit of Disney, the game encourages people to come together and enjoy the experience jointly through couch-based co-op.

/// "I want to recreate, at least conceptually, the experience I had recently watching a Disney film in the theatre," says Spector. "I looked around and saw a middle-aged game designer and his wife sitting there and enjoying the same film as an elderly couple sitting two rows in front, and enjoying the same experience as a young father and daughter. Joining people together seems to be what Disney is about."

Of course, the game's lack of online functionality stands in stark contrast to the company's aim of uniting a world of Disney fans. While it's the type of oversight that is perhaps acceptable to the Wii audience, it's a decision that'll prove more divisive on next-gen consoles. "Okay, look, a year from now I'm probably going to be back here saying, 'Oh my gosh, why didn't I do online co-op?' I just think Disney should be about bringing people together, and I just couldn't see that when you're putting on a headset and talking to someone a million miles away."

Along with the addition of co-op, Spector is keen to stress the importance of rectifying the mistakes of the original, outlining three

major areas of design overhaul in response to the original game's criticisms: camera, voice and persistence. The first of the three was a major rut in *Epic Mickey*'s design, requiring too much guidance and often obstructing the completion of some platforming areas. Playing the latest build of the Wii version supports Spector's claims of a vastly improved camera, but the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions feel sticky and unwieldy in comparison. In fact, it's not just the camera that causes issues with next-gen hardware, as the effortless aiming supported by the Wii Remote fails to translate to a traditional control pad. Controlling Mickey/Oswald's movements at the same time as directing the brush/remote with the other stick is a cumbersome task, exacerbated by the erratic camera movements. It's not so much of an issue for the PlayStation 3 as it supports Move, but it'll require plenty of polish to get the Xbox 360 controls up to a competent level.

/// Slightly more encouraging news is the addition of voice acting. It was a somewhat odd omission from the original – Disney characters only made the odd grunt or squeal – so Spector has employed a writer and an ensemble of voice talent to bring the characters to life. It also facilitated Spector's desire to produce the first (in his mind at least) videogame musical.

"I have a long-term plan that I'm not ready to talk about yet, about how to make songs that really are interactive," Spector slyly suggests. "It's not a performance game. There's a place for performance games and I have an interest in them, but there's another way to use song that's kind of more in keeping with the games I've made over the last twenty-nine years."

We're not given a moment to adjust, as the world of Wasteland is overturned with the return of the enigmatic Mad Doctor – *Epic Mickey*'s antagonist – who bursts straight into a jaunty number wherein he repents for his misdeeds, offering his help to Oswald as a new threat approaches. There's no doubt that the whole tune is evocative of classic Disney, but Spector has found surprising opposition to the idea of a videogame musical.

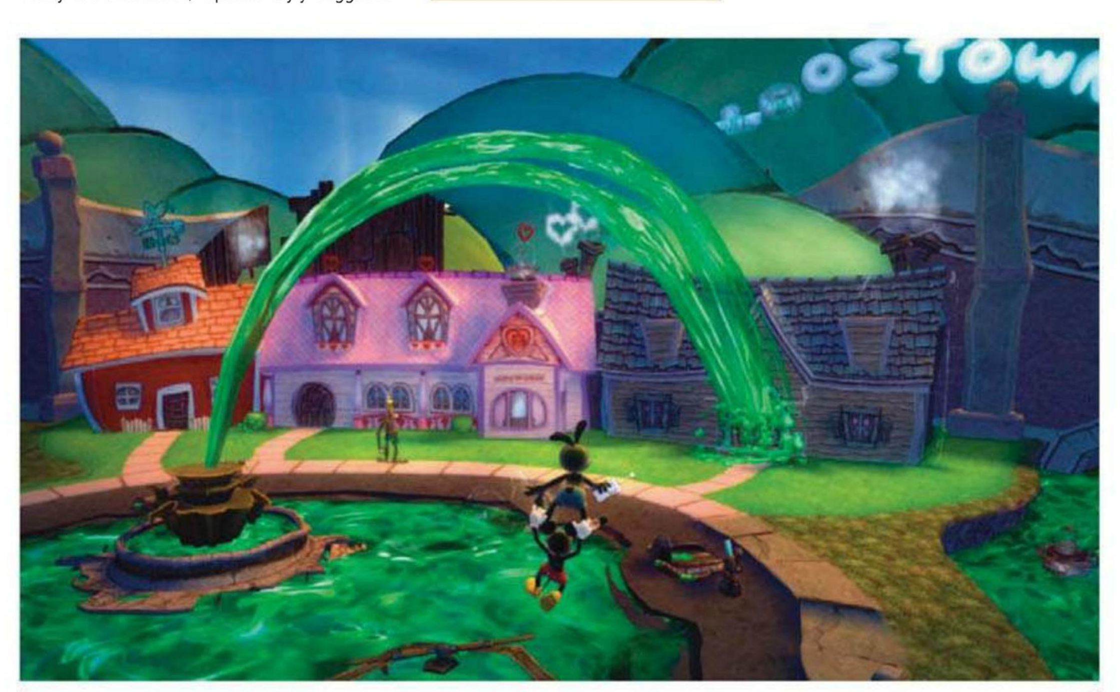
"I don't know if gamers are going to accept it. It is risky proposition, I guess," he says. "But it's a risk I'm willing to take. A lot of my co-workers and peers at Disney are worried about it, and again, just this last week, I've changed the way I talk about this, to be honest. When I started I assumed everyone was going to get it. I don't know about here in the UK, but in the States *Glee* and *Smash* are really popular, and there are singing competitions everywhere. When

SPECTOR'S DUCKTALES

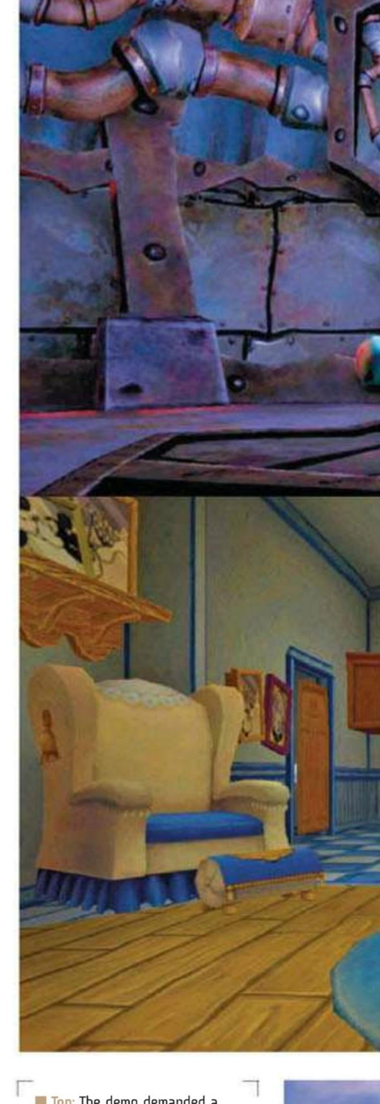
WHILE SPECTOR has been given free run of the Disney archives and interpreted beloved Disney characters in his *Epic Mickey* games, there's one Disney franchise that the ebullient developer has wanted to make a game of for years: *DuckTales*. "There are two things I bug Disney about on a regular basis," says Spector. "I mean, I ring every week and say, 'Let me do a Duck game!' Uncle Scrooge is my favourite Disney character and I love Donald!' Some day they're going to tire of hearing me complain and just let me do it to shut me up!" For now, though, the closest Spector has got to realising his dream is writing a four-issue arc of *DuckTales* comics, which he describes as "incredible fun and really hard."

"I'm not much interested in branching endgames anymore. I think Epic Mickey has a better approach"

WARREN SPECTOR JUNCTION POINT



Above: Oswald's hover ability that can carry Mickey for a short amount of time is reminiscent of Sonic's relationship with Tails, but according to Spector it was a coincidence and a completely unconscious similarity.





Top: The demo demanded a very basic use of thinner and paint to solve puzzles in a small area of Wasteland. Right: Junction Point contemplated implementing Kinect motion controls into the game, but failed to make it work because of problems finding a way to enable players to explore the world and utilise Mickey's brush. Below: We pose to Spector the ultimate Disney question: Why can Goofy talk while fellow dog Pluto can't? "There's never been a good answer given to that in the history of Disney," he says. "I don't think I'm going to be the one to answer it! I have no idea."

AI Oswald takes over if you're playing *Epic Mickey 2* solo, but certain areas will only be accessible with a human partner.

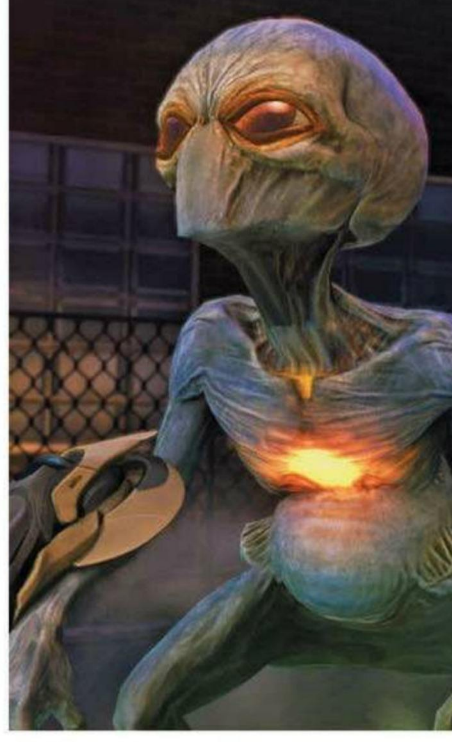


Tangled and *Enchanted* came out, no one said, 'It's a musical, I'm not going to see that.' I just assumed everyone would get it. But what I discovered, as I looked out at that sea of faces in the dark, was that there were enough people going, 'Oh my god, this is not for me,' that I just want to explain why we were doing it and how we're doing it."

/// However, the third objective for Junction Point to improve was one that was perhaps that most disappointing in the original game given Spector's illustrious career. The much-touted choice and consequence system seemed relatively inconsequential in the finished product, the ending of the game a short montage of areas that differed in degradation depending on Mickey's actions through the game. Surprisingly from the director of *Deus Ex*, there didn't seem to be a huge amount of significance to the choices made by the player throughout the single-player story.

"Lots of people talk to me about morality systems and moral decisions in my games, and I want to clarify that I never do that," states Spector. "We don't say right or wrong; we don't say good or bad; we don't say light and dark. Every choice brings rewards and every choice brings consequences, and every player chooses what is right or wrong. It's not for us to judge. There are two main approaches you can take to a player-controlled story: you can either have local choices that you can track minute-to-minute that *everyone* does and then get to the last mission – and this is *Deus Ex*, by the way – where you're standing there and basically say, 'If I go over there I'll get that endgame and if I go over there I'll get that endgame.' That's really unsatisfying. The other alternative is to track everything a player has done throughout and branch to a different endgame based on the choices you've made ten minutes into the game, and that doesn't work either. A player could make a decision in the first ten minutes of play that puts them irrevocably on a path towards an endgame, and they don't even know why they got to that! They'll be deeply disappointed. So that doesn't work. So in the first *Epic Mickey* we tried to do a third way: we're tracking everything from start to finish and then at the end of the game we actually constructed the cinematic on the fly based on what each player did in the game. I think that's an idea that has a lot of promise. I want to keep messing with that and see if we can make that idea even more robust."

It's indicative of Spector's approach to the sequel: iterating on the original without deviating too far from the beaten track. *Epic Mickey 2* isn't a drastic change in direction for the franchise, but rather delivers on the original game's potential without focusing much on innovation. Even the brief hands-on – only reflecting a small portion of an early stage in the game – exhibited both a familiar and discouraging lack of complexity in the puzzle design. Only time will tell whether Spector makes good on his promises and finally delivers a Disney adventure as epic as the title promises.



XCOM: Enemy Unknown

CONCEPT ■ *XCOM* returns to the hardened strategy of its namesake and aims to abate fan outrage.

The franchise invasion's second front

It couldn't be more confusing. Two *XCOM* games set for release just a few months apart, one a first-person shooter, the other a grassroots return to the strategy of the Gollop brothers' original. Announced in January, Firaxis's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* has garnered nothing but praise from franchise devotees. However, developer Firaxis – the studio tasked with instilling relevance into the classic turn-based strategy game – has nothing but sympathy for 2K Marin's drastically different take on the licence.

"I think the only feelings we felt were... we were surprised," sighs Firaxis's Jake Soloman, lead designer on *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. "Any negative reaction that we saw, which happens with any game, we felt bad about because we're both in such different spaces, I feel like we have our own environments and we also talk with the other team all the time, because *XCOM* has to make sense. What we were doing was trying to give fans of *XCOM* even more, so they're making this awesome new experience that doesn't tread on the original and we're actually making something that hews much closer to it. So after fifteen years we're giving fans of the original all kinds of stuff."

/// With development starting in 2007, the true irony is that Firaxis' strategy-based revamp of the *X-COM* brand was in the works long before 2K Marin announced its first-person shooter. But Firaxis too is also remaining spiritually true to its progenitor while making some significant formula tweaks that could prove equally as divisive as a complete genre switch – though in a less extreme capacity. Firstly, the Team Unit system present in the '94 original has been discarded, replaced with a pace-driven mechanic that enables operatives to move and then perform an action, or sprint to cover more distance. Secondly, there's a greater focus on individual squad members' skills, with a class system that naturally evolves each member of the team's abilities in a more simplistic manner.

Yet throughout the gameplay demo, there's never a sense that these new features impede on what Julian Gollop first achieved – rather they expand and contemporise with a cinematic veneer and considered pacing. Watching the gameplay alone betrays those complexities that have been carried over from the original – the presentation is slick enough to pass as a third-person shooter – but its foundations are built very much on the same blend of strategy and impulse.

"The idea was a bit naïve, probably," laughs Soloman. "It was to try and stay as true to the original as we possibly can, to keep all these elements from the original. We knew that obviously we weren't going to do that unless we knew what it entailed, and when we started really digging into *XCOM* we decided that this was what we had to have: it had to be turn-based; it had to have fog of war; it had to have full environmental destruction; it had to have regionalised areas; it had to have base building, and all these things we had before. So design-wise I said, 'We're going to make an honest successor to the original game.' But when we started listing out what that entailed, it became a bit daunting for everyone."

Sectoids (the retro-looking extra terrestrials) are currently occupying a petrol station, as the four-man squad uses suppressing fire and switch between cover to flank them (the team's sniper used a grappling hook to reach a nearby rooftop and therein snagged a bonus). Neither the importance of line of sight nor destructible scenery has been neutered; both play a part in the team's tactical response.

> "The idea was a bit naive, probably... to stay as true to the original as we possibly can"
>
> JAKE SOLOMON FIRAXIS GAMES

The significance of the latter is expressed in the solemn closing moments of the demonstration. One member of the team is crushed under a collapsing wall after a Muton (a brute-like alien breed) bursts through the structure. Much like in the original, permadeath is a key feature (fallen squad mates do not respawn, but are instead remembered on a memorial back at base), adding further weight and significance to every strategic whim or levelling up decision made through the course of the game. You can stop crying now: this is *X-COM* done right.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Firaxis Games
Release: Q4 2012
Players: 1

X-COM Profile

Originally conceived as a sequel to the ZX Spectrum's *Laser Squad*, Julian Gollop and his brother eventually spun the idea into *UFO: Enemy Unknown*. MicroProse released four core games in the series, but the franchise continued on in various guises, with the last instalment – a misguided third-person shooter – published by Infogrames.

Developer History

X-COM: Terror From The Deep **2005 [PC]**
X-COM: Enforcer **2001 [PC]**
X-COM: Interceptor **1998 [PC]**
UFO: Enemy Unknown **1994 [PC]**

High Point

It's hard to ignore the innovation and impact of the original, *UFO: Enemy Unknown*. Oh, and those aliens were pretty terrifying.



■ Above: While the cartoon aesthetic of the original has been cast aside, there's still a sense of playfulness to the game's visuals.

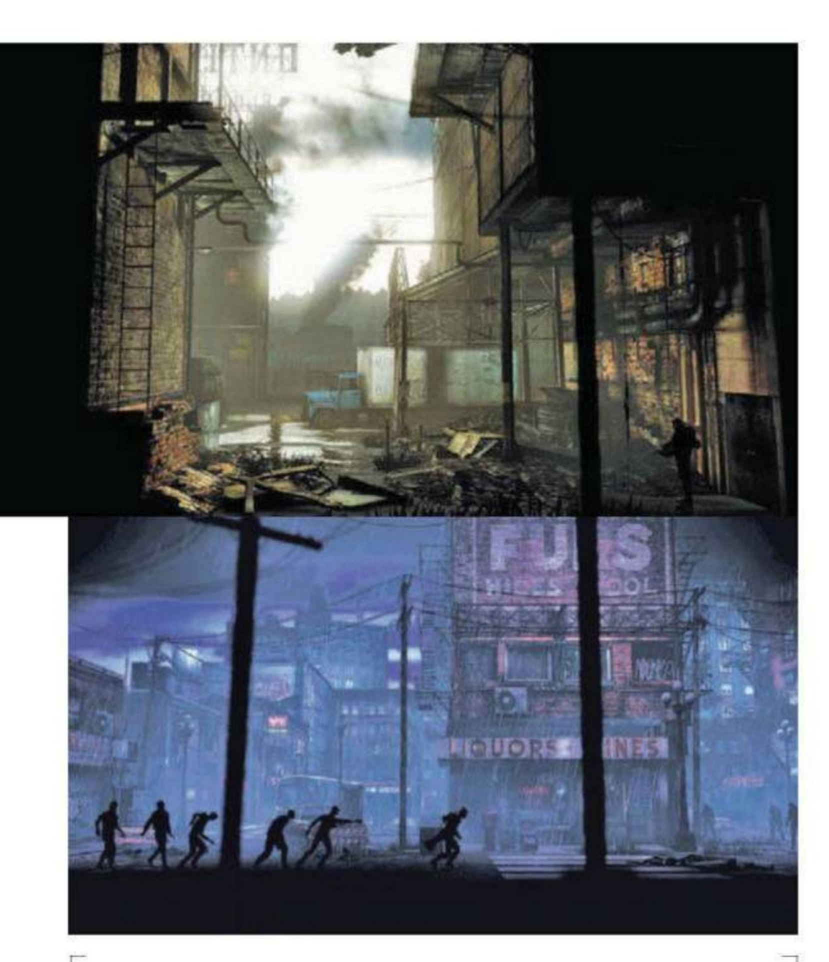


ALIEN ANT FARM

THE XCOM base is sort of a living diorama: a hub presented in a side-view vertical cross-section that players return to at the end of each mission. Here, you can enter the Science Lab to set your team's mission research goals, enter the Barracks to customise your squad and unlock weapon upgrades to be used across missions. Elsewhere, the Mission Control room contains the familiar Geoscape – a holographic globe used to scan for enemies across Earth and pinpoint the location of alien invaders. While our demonstration only featured four troops heading out into battle, players can select a maximum of six soldiers per mission, depending on their scientific and military agendas.



It's not 2012's most visually impressive game, but at least Firaxis has gotten rid of the weird baby-looking aliens present in the original *X-COM*, instead replaced with the far more traditional grey, big-head, bug-eyes look. Left: The ant farm perspective of the central XCOM hub is likely to incite a few complaints from the community, but it enables quick navigation across all the different departments as your base gradually expands.



Above: The art design is striking, eerie and haunting, incredibly executed by first-time developer Tequila Works. Below: A rare example of Randall using firepower to vanquish an attacking zombie. Most of the time, he'll have to use the environment or quickly evade enemies if he wants to avoid joining the legion of the unliving.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360
Origin: Spain
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Tequila Works
Release: Summer
Players: 1

Zombie Profile

It wasn't until the mid-Nineties that *Resident Evil* and *House Of The Dead* popularised the idea of the shuffling undead as a serious antagonist. Whether laced with gore, mindless cannon fodder or an ancillary mode to the latest *Call Of Duty*, zombies are here to stay.

Zombie History

Plants Vs. Zombies **2009 [Multi]**

Call Of Duty: World At War **2008 [Multi]**

Left 4 Dead **2008 [Multi]**

Resident Evil **1996 [Multi]**

High Point

It's debatable whether zombies are still central, but the *Resident Evil* franchise has managed to constantly reinvent itself through the years.

Deadlight

CONCEPT An atmospheric survive-'em-up inspired by the adventure games of old.

Who said zombies were dead?

***Deadlight* is not a zombie game," says Raul Rubio, the CEO and creative director at developer,** Tequila Works. "It's a game of survival – it could be aliens instead of zombies and it would work the same way. The question you've got to ask yourself is: what would you do to survive the apocalypse?"

Fire warden Randall Wayne is at the centre of the uncompromising vision of a barren 1980's Seattle, an isolated everyman searching for a safe haven as the dead rise from the grave. He's not proficient with firearms, he doesn't forge together a chainsaw and a hockey stick, and he certainly doesn't have assistance as he stumbles into a room full of reanimated corpses. It places the player in a vulnerable state, where evasion and strategy outweigh brute strength, utilising the environment to either escape or turn a seemingly innocuous object into a deadly device.

"We wanted to make the type of cinematic platformer that was very popular in the Eighties," cites Rubio of Deadlight's inspirations, listing *Another World*, *Flashback* and *Prince Of Persia* as key reference points. "For the story, which is very gritty and hopeless, we've taken inspiration from classic authors such as J.G.





Ballard, Cormac McCarthy and the comic book series *The Walking Dead*. So it's a very oppressive setting in the Pacific north west of America – it's always this grey weather – this feeling of isolation, that you are alone and this world full of life is now dead. It's a shadow of its former self."

No doubt a legion of plebs will make the obvious comparison to Playdead's *Limbo* – the bar for which all dark/mature XBLA games shall be judged – but its visuals are far more varied, even if the tone is just as disturbingly grim. Hollow factories with creaking walkways echo themes of isolation; ravaged footpaths flecked with blood and dirt are accompanied by the disquieting susurrus of a nearby stream; later a solitary corpse wanders aimlessly searching for sustenance.

/// It's a horrifying tableau of extinction, witnessed through the eyes of the primary character who might not be the most reliable of narrators. Through his commentary we understand that there's no solid explanation as to the source of the zombie outbreak – some believe it's the Russians (this is an era still rapt in Cold War paranoia – like all good zombie fiction the outbreak serves as a pertinent metaphor). We come to grips with the fact that there's little hope for Randall: his fellow survivors abandon him to search for shelter on his own after he shoots a woman he believes to be infected.

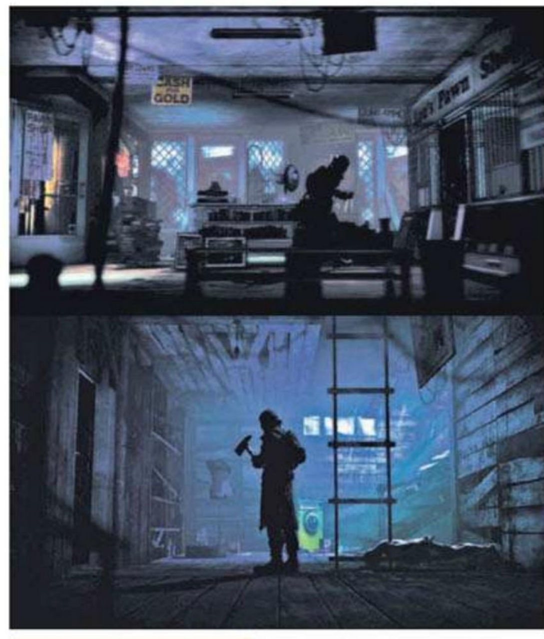
It's the sort of nightmarish and deeply suffocating environment that the genre has often shied away from since the days of genre masterpieces *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* – 16 and 13 years old, respectively – which placed a clear precedence on skill and puzzle solving to outfox the undead, rather than relying on the few firearms and the scant ammunition available among the ravaged wasteland. *Deadlight* also finds restraint in the gore department. One segment ripe for a flashy death sequence turns surprisingly sombre, as a downed power line electrifies a pool of water near a couple of zombies. After navigating above the hazard and whistling to attract the attention of the undead, the two stumble towards the trap and fall down to a permanent end.

> "Visually, movies like First Blood and The Goonies were a huge influence on Deadlight"
> RAUL RUBIO TEQUILA WORKS

"We think we are very elegant with that because we're using silhouettes, which allow us to introduce these gory elements with some taste," suggests Rubio. "The zombies are created with randomly generated parts; sometimes they miss leaps or have their arms hanging, but it's not that repulsive. It's a more realistic approach as to how zombies should be."

As the gameplay complements the narrative, *Deadlight* once again illustrates the outstanding potential that XBLA affords developers, lending unique and unconventional tools for which to tell original stories. On this evidence, *Deadlight* could turn out to be one of the most surprising success stories of 2012.

Below Diaries and audio recordings are scattered among levels, detailing valuable backstory that expands on the main storyline.

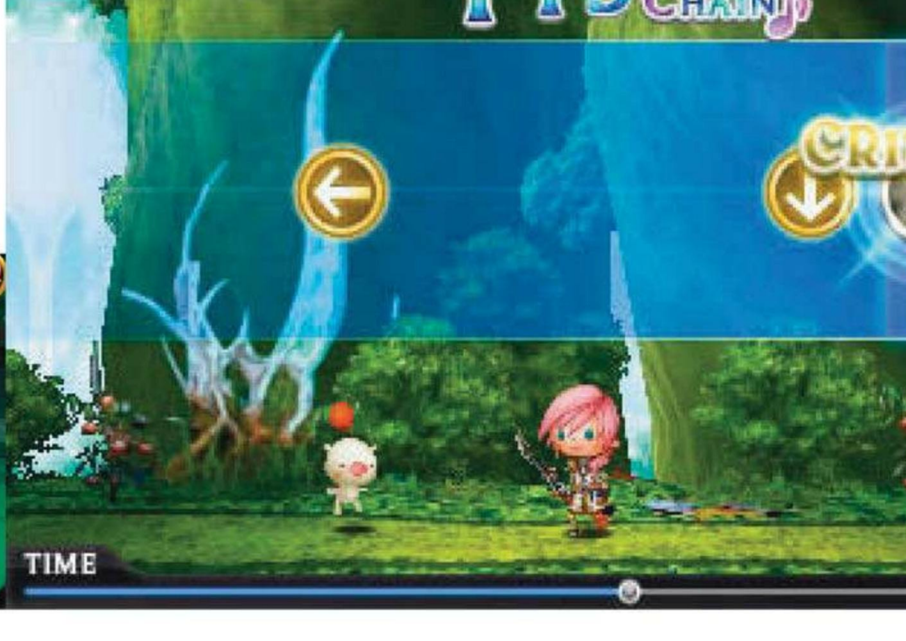


FRIENDS AT THE END

AS IS tradition with survival games set in a post-apocalyptic environment, ravaging monsters may not be the biggest danger in the wilderness that Randall will have to deal with throughout *Deadlight*. The nomad will encounter other not-dead humans through the course of the single-player campaign, some of which will be friendlier than others. "You will find other survivors in the game," says Rubio, "and like in the real world, finding other people is not always good for you." It should add another interesting dynamic to the game, one that will question both Randall's morality and sanity, while underlining themes of Eighties Cold War paranoia.



Above: Most areas are compact, with scaleable platforms used to navigate the wasteland. The demo we played was linear, but there will be more open environments later. Left: Sometimes Randall will become outnumbered: it's time to unload copious amounts of firepower into faces.





■ The hardest difficulty setting, named Ultimate (and, bizarrely, one up from Expert) was handled by rhythm-action aficionados on the development team and is extremely challenging. Like all good rhythm games, though, it matches the beat perfectly.

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

CONCEPT ■ 25 years of *Final Fantasy* celebrated with 70 memorable tunes, repurposed for a unique blend of rhythm-action and role-playing game.

Get phoenix down with yourself

You know that *Final Fantasy VII* remake you've been begging Square Enix for all these years? Well it's finally here. Sort of.

You may have dreamed of a full HD remake of *FFVII*, Cloud and company rendered in all the glossy sheen of *FFXIII*, but Square Enix has other plans, because this remake is a rhythm-action game. You and a band of warriors will take a trip across the fields of Midgar, battling monsters by literally tapping out *FFVII*'s overworld theme on the 3DS; you'll revisit one of the most tragic romances in videogames by swirling along to Aeris's theme; and, finally, you'll battle a series of monsters while conducting aggressive slashes and stabs to 'One Winged Angel', the theme behind everyone's favourite pantomime JRPG villain. And you'll mostly do all this while watching paper doll versions of those classic characters recreate a sort of puppet theatre rendition of the original game. Square Enix certainly can't be accused of being predictable.

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy isn't really an *FFVII* remake, of course. It's a 25th anniversary celebration of the whole *Final Fantasy* series that revisits all fourteen main *FF*s to date in rhythm-action form, selecting the best and most memorable themes from those games and asking you to play along to them in familiar taps, slashes and holds of the stylus.

Each game is divided into three chapters – the overworld, a battle and an event scene, though not always in that order – and each recreates the original music from that particular part of the game. Though the layout of the notes is different for each chapter type, the gameplay always uses those same taps, slashes and holds, which means *Theatrythm* plays very instinctively. It's not necessarily easy, but the barrier to entry is virtually non-existent so that just about any *FF* fan can jump in and enjoy their favourite orchestrations.

/// This being *Final Fantasy* though, you won't just be playing an ordinary rhythm-action game. The designers have actually found a way to incorporate RPG elements. There's party management for a start. You can assemble a team of four, mixing and matching characters from across the *FF* canon, and can then level them up or equip items in between games. Better characters encounter more notes during play, enriching the rhythm-action further.

Just like an RPG, those who perform well in *Theatrhythm* will reap greater rewards. During battle scenes, for example, hitting a section of steel notes perfectly will trigger a Summon, which features its own set of notes, visually spectacular results and, of course, a little fan service for those who remember the giant beasts. Perfecting a similar section in an event scene, meanwhile, triggers an encore to the song, complete with additional notes and more memorable footage from the original game to nostalgically play in the background.

In total there are 70 tunes included on the *Theatrhythm* cartridge, including the intro and end themes that play for each of the 14 games, and Square Enix is also offering a wealth of extra DLC tunes through the new Nintendo Network (see boxout). There's no shortage of content here even before you start tinkering with the RPG elements or the difficulty levels which, believe us, will not be mastered first time around.

As a celebration of all things *Final Fantasy* it might not be the first thing you'd imagine but after you've had a go, the idea of *Theatrhythm* somehow all makes sense – to the degree that you wonder why no one ever tried it before. The scores of Nobuo Uematsu and the other *FF* composers are among the best in the business and their reputations do not go undeserved. There's a reason these tunes are constantly rerecorded, released in epic compilations, or played live on stage, and it's because, even if you don't know them by name, hearing those beautiful melodies and dramatic beats takes you right back to a thousand memorable moments that define a lifetime of gaming. Feeding those tunes back into an interactive experience all their own is a fitting tribute to 25 years of great RPGs, and the full celebration can't come soon enough.

> "It will reawaken the magic and memories that have brought the series close to the hearts of so many"
>
> PRESS RELEASE SQUARE ENIX

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: indies zero
Release: Summer (Japan: Out Now)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 1997, Tokyo's indies zero is a work-for-hire studio that regularly partners with the likes of Namco Bandai, Nintendo and, now, Square Enix. You might not know the developer but if you're a hardcore handheld player you've almost certainly played one of the studio's games.

Developer History

DualPenSports **2011 [3DS]**
Retro Game Challenge **2007 [DS]**
Cooking Guide: Can't Decide What To Eat? **2006 [DS]**
Electroplankton **2005 [DS]**

Developer Point

Retro Game Challenge and its Japan-only sequel are masterworks in highly playable Eighties pastiche. But we have a feeling that *Theatrhythm* is about to top it in the nostalgia stakes.



All songs in the game are the original videogame versions rather than orchestral re-recordings. So for the 8 and 16-bit games you get the genuine chiptunes of the originals. The only exception is the Gurugu Volcano theme from *FFI*, which is from the PSone remake.





MUSIC DOWNLOAD

OF THE 70 songs on the *Theatrhythm* cartridge, many were selected from results of a fan survey held by Square Enix in Japan. The final listing, however, doesn't quite follow popular demand, as the team has suggested that an overwhelming number of requests were for *FFVII* music alone. Want more than are on the cart? Square Enix has ambitions to provide up to 50 additional tracks via Nintendo Network, and has already released multiple DLC batches in Japan. New tracks released so far have even included tracks from *FF* games not represented in *Theatrhythm*'s main mode, such as *FFXIII-2* and PSP spin-off *Type-0*, so we can probably expect more surprise tunes in the future.





Above: A consistent frame-rate is essential, so it's great to hear that *Theatrhythm* plays at a constant 60fps, even when displaying in 3D. Event scenes, due to their use of video, run at 30fps, though still constant.



"This is something that no-one has tried before, and there's usually a reason for that"
ATSUSHI INABA PLATINUM GAMES

■ Killer hair and Scarborough Fair return at last, albeit not in the guise the rumour mills have been whispering about for months. A true sequel can't come soon enough, though.

Anarchy Reigns

CONCEPT ■ Multiplayer melee mayhem in the *MadWorld* universe – it's *Power Stone* for a new generation, if you like

All around me are familiar faces, worn-out places

In all truth, we'd started to lose interest in *Anarchy Reigns*. The past year hasn't exactly been kind to Platinum's ambitious celebration of gaming chaos, you see. The release date was bumped back from Q4 last year to January, later slipping again to its current July date, and all the while the curtains of secrecy that surround the game didn't so much as quiver.

That we still haven't gone hands-on with the game so close to release is a worrying sign. But even so, the rays of hope we cling to – namely those that beam brightly from Platinum's body of work – have been just about enough to keep the multiplayer brawler on our collective radar. Funny, then, how a single announcement managed to turn that distant and fuzzy blip into a must-have gaming beacon for the dry summer months. Call us shallow if you will, but Bayonetta just has that effect on us.

Before you start back-flipping about the place and taping toy guns to your feet though, there's some bad news. Bayonetta's inclusion as a playable character is currently limited to a Japan-only pre-order incentive, though we have little doubt the Umbra witch will make it to these shores as well – Sega would be daft to deny Platinum's sassy figurehead the opportunity to coax many a hot-blooded male and avid gamer alike into parting with their cash. And as predictable as her inclusion may be, it's also surely one of the best ways to explain the new mechanics of *Anarchy Reigns* – learning how to employ her familiar attacks under the new system would surely be the easiest way for *Bayonetta* veterans to learn the ropes here, although the few that played *MadWorld* have a similarly useful benchmark in Jack as well.

As exciting as its roster and premise may be, the biggest doubt still looming over *Anarchy Reigns* is whether or not its multiplayer focus will still allow for a solo experience capable of holding players' attention for longer than a few matches. Action Trigger Events, while surely not numerous and varied enough to support Sega's claims that no two matches will be the same, still stand to make for *Split/Second*-style set-pieces worth waiting for – even with a few of the more close-to-the-bone showpieces removed in the wake of last year's natural disaster, there's no shortage of crazy stuff going on. Bombing runs, SWAT raids, explosions, mobs of AI enemies out for blood… it's all sufficiently crazy from what we've seen so far, but will need to be more than just that in order to keep players coming back. Word of rival campaigns approaching the (presumably nonsensical) narrative from opposite sides is interesting, sure, but we're holding out for Platinum to prove that the melee silliness can be as involving and enjoyable in single-player as it is in multiplayer. Please, guys, fly us to the moon one more time…



Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: 6 July
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Platinum Games was established in 2006 by a veritable who's who of Japanese development stars, with the former Clover dream team of Inaba and Kamiya reunited to bring yet more joy to the world. Shinji Mikami collaborated on Vanquish before forming Tango Gameworks, and the studio's passion and ability continues to shine through in every release.

Developer History

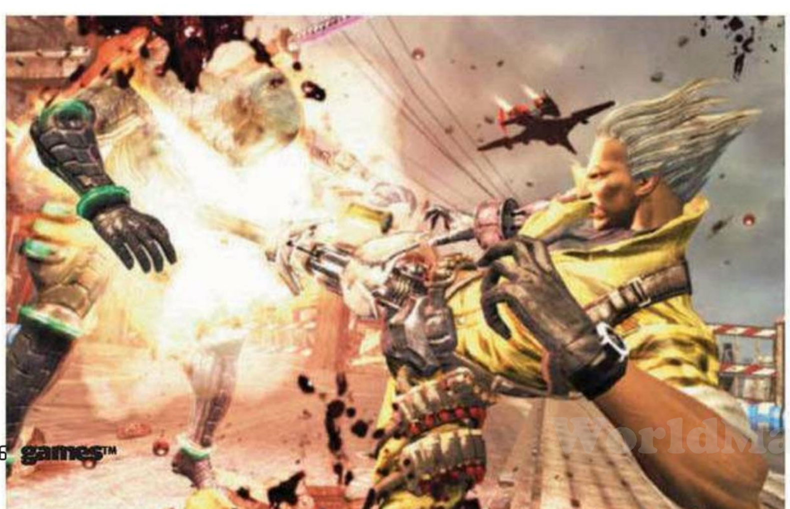
Vanquish **2010 [Multi]**
Bayonetta **2010 [Multi]**
MadWorld **2009 [Wii]**
Infinite Space **2009 [DS]**

High Point

As good as that list is, anyone that doesn't pick *Bayonetta* as the best of the bunch must need their brain examining.



■ Above: With most of the cast cyborgs, realism hasn't restrained the character design at all. Expect to use all sorts of silly weapons before you even start picking up items.





■ Left: With such a rich catalogue of Disney characters to draw from, it's strange that Square Enix should elect to instead introduce its own line of funny little bastards. Below: Disney worlds presented in the game include, but are not limited to *Tron*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Three Musketeers*, as well as the full cast of characters you would expect to see appearing.

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

CONCEPT ■ Nintendo finally gets a proper *Kingdom Hearts* game with full 3D combat and Disney content befitting the series' original concept.

Well it has a 3 in the title. That's a start...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
Release: 20 July (Japan: Out Now)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Kingdom Hearts producer Tetsuya Nomura joined Square in the early Nineties and developed a strong fan base for his character designs. Within a few years he became a highly influential member of the company and now runs his own team, currently working on *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and *Kingdom Hearts III*.

Developer History

Final Fantasy XIII-2 **2011 [Multi]**
The World Ends With You **2007 [DS]**
Final Fantasy X-2 **2003 [PS2]**
The Bouncer **2000 [PS2]**

High Point

Nomura deserves special credit for managing to spend the best part of a decade developing *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* without showing very much of it at all.

After a few years of shaky DS spin-offs, we wouldn't blame you for being sceptical of the latest *Kingdom Hearts*, but it looks as though *Dream Drop Distance* may be a real return to form. For one thing it's made by the same team as PSP's *Birth By Sleep*, the most popular *Kingdom Hearts* title not to be released on console. And, crucially, the 3DS's comparatively powerful hardware allows *Kingdom Hearts*' Disney content to be done properly, with slick animation and authentic voice acting. Finally, producer Tetsuya Nomura promises that the story of *Dream Drop Distance*, unlike previous spin-offs, will form an important part of the series narrative, and directly tie into the events of the forthcoming *Kingdom Hearts III*.

After a couple of hours with the Japanese release of the game, we're prepared to go out on a limb and say this is sure to be the best *Kingdom Hearts* in years. As predicted, the Disney content is much more prominent than it has been in recent titles. Mickey, Donald and Goofy appear regularly throughout the game in big roles and, even in Japanese, their antics crack us up. If you like the classic Disney humour then this will be a game where you don't actually mind sitting and watching a cut-scene.

On a gameplay level too, there's a definite thread of quality running throughout. Full 3D combat returns, with hack-and-slash Keyblade strikes as an obvious staple, but Sora and Riku are also able to air dash, bounce off walls and swing around lampposts as a standard part of the move set. Comboing these moves into a string of attacks is great fun and almost makes *Dream Drop Distance* feel like a miniature *Devil May Cry*. Almost.

> "The story of this game will serve as the opening chapter of the final conflict, and will be full of surprises"
> TETSUYA NOMURA SQUARE ENIX

Square Enix has also taken inspiration from the JRPG's current obsession with monster allies. Much like the system in *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, this allows up to three collectible monsters to follow Sora around and join in the battles. Each has a power gauge that, when filled, allows Sora and monster to perform a team-up attack. Grabbing one monster by the ears and bouncing around on him like a space hopper is enough to convince us that this is a very good idea indeed.

Finally, the oddest addition to this sequel is the way in which main characters Sora and Riku play through parallel alternate versions of each world simultaneously, with control switching between each when one character has conceded too many attacks in a row. We're not certain exactly what the point of the switching mechanic is at present, but it's certainly intriguing enough to make us want to play more of this apparently well-rounded spin-off.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

JAKE HUNTER: RONDO OF REVENGE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Arc System Works
Developer: In-house



ONE OF Japan's most prominent videogame detectives, Jake Hunter, heads to 3DS this June in *Rondo Of Revenge*. The character has been popular in Japan since the late-Eighties first introduced him to domestic audiences, but only 2008's DS entry has made it overseas since the series' inception. Hopefully it'll secure a PAL release, so someone can explain what a rondo has to do with revenge.

CRYSTAL CONQUEST

Format: PC
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house



SQUARE ENIX unveils a new free-to-play browser-based RTS heading for Yahoo Games later this year. It'll involve two teams of 20 players duking it out over online servers, picking one of four available classes and equipping Skill Decks pre-match to gain specific stat boosts during the battle. It's not likely to have a wide appeal but, by gosh, does it sure look pretty.

WORMS REVOLUTION

Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Team 17
Developer: In-house



WORMS REVOLUTION iterates once again on the 17-year-old formula, promising invertebrate carnage across 2D turn-based combat. In an unexpected move, *Worms* creator Andy Davidson has returned to Team 17 after a 14-year absence, and is supporting development on *Revolution* with a vision that looks to recapture some of the classic humour and gameplay not seen since *Worms: The Director's Cut*.

EURO 2012

Format: PC, PS3, PS Vita, Xbox 360
Publisher: EA
Developer: In-house



CHAMPIONSHIP EDITIONS of *FIFA* games have never had a problem with sales, but EA has changed tack and announced that *Euro 2012* will be a DLC expansion for *FIFA 12*. It'll feature all 53 competing teams and a new Exhibition mode, along with other bells and whistles to make it worth the extra spend. Looks to us like EA's using *Euro 2012* to test the water for future DLC expansions.

HUNTER X HUNTER WONDER ADVENTURE

Format: PSP
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house



AFTER LAUNCHING a site teasing a new announcement in March, it's fair to say that no one was quite expecting Namco Bandai to announce a *Hunter X Hunter Wonder Adventure* manga adaptation for the PSP. The game features an intriguing Change Drive system, which enables characters Gon and Killua to swap combat style – for instance, Gon can swap between fighting and fishing.

ORGARHYTHM

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Acquire
Developer: Nelio



SHENMUE AND *Space Channel 5* developer Tak Hirai's new studio Nelio has announced its first game as *Orgarhythm* – a strategy rhythm-action game where players assume the role of God and command water, fire and earth people. Players start with a simple bass melody to get them going, which gradually expands as troops spread across the continent and shape the world around them.

ORCS MUST DIE! 2

Format: PC
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Robot Entertainment



WAR MAGE will once again battle against those pesky orcs in a new single-player and co-op campaign. It seems to be sticking to the tried-and-tested formula, with a tweaked upgrade system notable as one of the few enhancements, along with the usual PRbot spiel of more weapons, enemies and fun than you can possibly imagine a sequel to *Orcs Must Die!* could provide.

KILLER IS DEAD

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Grasshoppper Manufacture

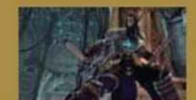


FAMITSU HAS unveiled Grasshopper's next game, a swordplay-centric action title which is thought to blend the gameplay of *killer7* and *No more Heroes*. However, don't go jumping to obvious conclusions and getting all overexcited; despite the title, it isn't actually a sequel to the developer's assassin masterwork, but instead is a dark espionage game that puts players in the shoes of a condemned man.



DELAYED – Prey 2 (Multi)

Bethesda Softworks has issued a statement to clarfiy that *Prey 2* has not been cancelled, as suspected, but will also not be released in 2012 due to concerns about its overall quality.



DELAYED – Darksiders 2 (Multi)

THQ's big hope for 2012 has dropped back to August in order to, according to the publisher, "meet the high quality threshold that we are committed to achieving."

WRC 3

Format: **PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Black Bean**
Developer: **Milestone**



THE LATEST Rally tie-in revs up for release later this year, with Milestone returning on development duties. After the lukewarm reception of last year's sequel, Black Bean is confident that third time's the charm, with a new engine nestled beneath the bonnet to spruce up gameplay. Terrible automotive analogies aside, we've yet to see any cars in the provided press shots, which is a bit backwards.

ALIEN FEAR

Format: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **City Interactive**
Developer: **In-house**



SNIPER GHOST Warrior dev City Interactive has announced a new XBLA/PSN FPS, utilising the Unreal Engine 3 for its vision of a sci-fi future. Apart from a splurge of concept art and a few tidbits on co-op, there's not a huge amount known about the space-set blaster, but expect something suitably accomplished, and no doubt very, very brown.

LITTLE BATTLER EXPERIENCE W

Format: **PSP**
Publisher: **Level-5**
Developer: **In-house**



WHILE THE Nintendo 3DS plumps for a jazzed-up remake of last year's *Little Battler eXperience*, PSP owners will be rejoiced to know that a sequel set 14 years after the original is in the works. The main change-up in design is that players now control two characters, with newcomer Hiro Oozora joining Ban Yamano on a quest to save the world… with plastic toy robots. Good luck with that.

GATEWAYS

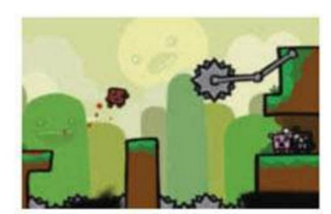
Format: **PC, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Smudged Cat Games**
Developer: **In-house**



IMAGINE IF *Portal* was 2D, featured half-a-dozen other physics-bending devices and wasn't that much like *Portal* at all. Well, that pretty much sums up *Gateways*, an indie platformer that uses a series of portals, sorry, gateways to enable inventor Ed to travel through space and time, and shrink the environment. It looks a little rough around the edges but the concept is hugely inventive.

SUPER MEAT BOY: THE GAME

Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **Team Meat**
Developer: **In-house**



REDUBBED *SUPER Meat Boy: The Game*, Team Meat has announced that the blood-drenched wonder will be making its way onto iOS devices later this year. Remade from the ground-up to accommodate for tactile touch-screen controls suitable for iWhatevers, as a direct port would be pretty much unplayable. It should ensure that Team Meat's iOS entry is practically a brand new adventure.

BALDUR'S GATE

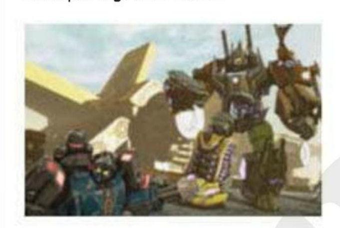
Format: **PC, iOS**
Publisher: **Beamdog**
Developer: **Overhaul Games**



BIOWARE'S *BALDUR'S Gate* receives a graphical revamp and a few gameplay tweaks for its debut on the iPad later this year. Apple zealots will no doubt add the exclusive inclusion of multiplayer, swipeable screens and multi-touch gestures as another reason to feel self-satisfied. Oh, and it'll be followed by an enhanced edition of the sequel, so just try and pretend not to be excited.

TRANSFORMERS: FALL OF CYBERTRON

Format: **PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **High Moon Studios**



NEWS HAS quietened down surrounding High Moon Studios' latest tale of robots kicking the franchise longevity out of each other. Thank the rusty heavens, then, that a gameplay trailer has escaped from Activision, showcasing that, yes, robots are in it and, yes, they will be hitting each other very hard in the face. Can Cybertron be saved? Who cares – lets see some metal bleed.

BRAIN TRAINING 3: DEMON TRAINING

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**



DR. RYUTA Kawashima is back on hand to deliver a bevy of perplexing puzzlers that will now turn the innocuous conundrum conjurer into the devil himself. This time around the taxing exercises will focus on concentration and working memory, with a much more difficult spin on the challenges. Expect it to shift about a continent's worth of copies shortly after release.


"I remember playing it as a ten-year-old, so of course it was all very strange to me"
FLORENT CASTELNÉRAC, NADEO



WHY I ❤...

Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards

FLORENT CASTELNÉRAC
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, NADEO

"I REMEMBER playing it as a ten-year-old, so of course it was all very strange to me. My mother had to help me with some levels and it was especially difficult because it was in English, and for the launch protection questions I had absolutely no idea because of my age. If you look at it today, it is so ugly and such a bad game. People don't know how great it was then – they'd say, 'This guy is just crazy! He's trying to look at naughty pictures.' And you know, episode after episode I'd say, 'Lets install Leisure Suit Larry' and it was always a 'what the fuck!?' experience.

The [modern LSL titles were] always trying to show you everything, but the goal is the imagination. When this gets out I'll have to deny it in the community."

C-Virus Experiment 12235
Project

Goal of Project
To create a new life form from a chrysalid state.

Date:
Location: Center 14
Experiment

Subject: [redacted]

TITLE: RESIDENT EVIL 6 **FORMAT:** PC, PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360

RESIDE
REB

ZOMBIES ARE BACK! AND SO ARE SEVERAL OTHER CLASSIC RESIDENT EVIL FEATURES. BUT RESIDENT EVIL 6 IS NO THROWBACK. IT'S THE MOST PROGRESSIVE AND DRAMATIC OF CAPCOM'S SURVIVAL-HORROR TITLES YET. GAMES™ TALKS TO THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM AIMING TO TOP ALL OF THE SERIES' ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

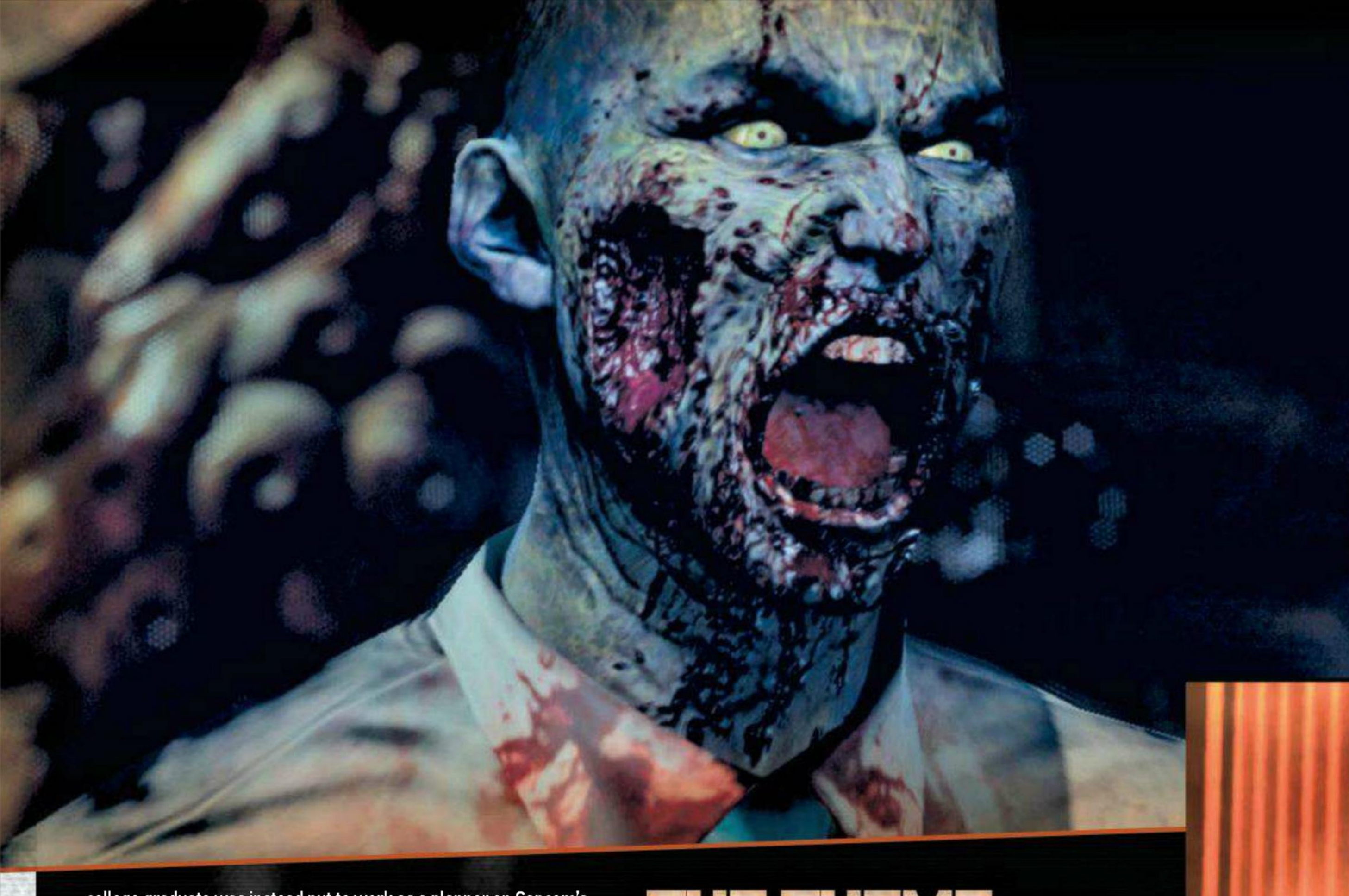


PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE RELEASE: 2 OCTOBER

NT EVIL ORN

"I SPENT MOST OF LAST YEAR PLAYING *DEAD SPACE* AND WATCHING *THE WALKING DEAD*," SAYS EIICHIRO SASAKI, DIRECTOR OF *RESIDENT EVIL 6*, kicking off a long conversation that runs through all of the 40-year-old game designer's influences, from Romero movies to J-horror films like *The Ring* to the likes of *Alan Wake* and *Project Zero*. Sasaki loves the horror genre in all its forms, so you could say he was born to work on *Resident Evil*, and he'd probably agree with you.

Sasaki was even lucky enough to join Capcom in 1995, right at the time when Shinji Mikami was working on the original PlayStation game. A lover of mystery novels and adventure games like *King's Quest*, as well as horror, he would have been a perfect addition to the team, but the



college graduate was instead put to work as a planner on Capcom's first 3D fighting game, *Star Gladiator*. From there, Sasaki tells us, he would watch the *Resident Evil* team in fascination, and would over the years develop a deep love for the long-running survival-horror series. Now, sixteen years on, his time has finally come, and Sasaki is in charge of a new *Resident Evil* that cherry-picks the greatest aspects of those previous games he watched being made across the office floor, while evolving its game design further than ever, incorporating those wider horror influences that have consumed Sasaki's spare time.

Not just his spare time, actually. The influence of EA's *Dead Space* is clear to see throughout Capcom's output this year, not just in *Resident Evil* but also in *Lost Planet 3*. "We've spent many days studying *Dead Space*," says Sasaki while pretending to take notes on the EA game with an invisible pen and paper. He specifically references *Dead Space*'s innovative HUD as an influence, but it's really the ability to move and shoot that is the most important lesson learned. Capcom has finally waved goodbye to tank controls and, in doing so, has brought *Resident Evil* more in line with modern Western tastes.

BUT IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES. The change in controls will allow *Resident Evil 6* to put the pressure on players in ways that no other horror game has done to date. "I think first of all we didn't want to make a straight-up action-type control scheme for the game," says Sasaki. "We're still trying to make a horror experience. This is horror as entertainment. To that end, I think it was necessary to open up the controls a little, make them smoother, so you could immerse yourself in this world more easily. But that doesn't mean you're going to lose control over the player in terms of how they experience this world we've created. You can give them more freedom of control while still guiding their experience in certain ways."

Early trailers hinted at this, and as lead designer Jiro Taoka demos the game to us we see exactly what Sasaki means when he talks about the tension between freedom of control and scripted horror. Zombies may have returned to *Resident Evil* after a couple of games on vacation, but they've returned a little more aggressive than before.

THE THEME OF RESIDENT EVIL 6 IS THAT WE'RE TRYING TO DELIVER A HORROR ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE

These zombies are slightly faster, will try to overpower the player in groups and will physically grab at or even pounce at anything resembling a walking lunch. As well as the ability to move and shoot, the player can drop to the floor, creating some critical distance between them and the zombie. But it will only last a few seconds before said zombie tries to jump at their throats. Rolling around to dodge attacks while trying to line up a headshot is essential, and it perfectly illustrates that having more control over a character doesn't necessarily mean you won't feel overwhelmed by the zombie horde. "Even though we've opened up the controls, doing that allows us to do more things, tell the story in new and unique ways," Sasaki adds.

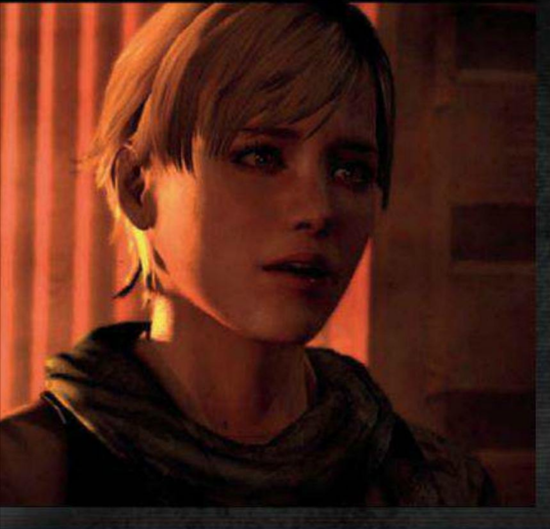
Survival still very much goes hand-in-hand with horror, only now it's been amped up to a more dramatic level. "The theme of *Resident Evil 6* is that we're trying to deliver a horror entertainment experience," says producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi. "We're trying to make everything in this game as dramatic as possible, from the storyline

C-Virus Experiment 12235
Project

Goal of Project
To create a new life form from a chrysalid state.



CERTAIN ENEMIES INFECTED BY THE C-VIRUS WILL GROW FROM *INVASION OF THE BODYSNATCHERS*-STYLE PODS KNOWN AS CRYSALIDS. THE IDEA, SAYS CAPCOM, IS TO CREATE A SENSE OF FEAR, AS PLAYERS WON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT WILL EMERGE FROM THOSE PODS, OR WHEN.



itself to the action of this game." Which is presumably where *The Walking Dead* comes in. Sasaki tells us that his defining memory of the AMC TV series is that nail-biting tension of not knowing what will happen next – a quality Capcom believes has been lost from *Resident Evil* in recent years. "If you think back to the original game, there was always that tension of not knowing what was around the next corner, what kind of creature or monster you would encounter," says Kobayashi. "We're trying to bring that back for this game. We're trying to put back in all the thrills, chills and spills you'd expect from the *Resident Evil* franchise, but we're taking everything to the next level."

AS IF TO PUT ITS MONEY WHERE ITS MOUTH IS, CAPCOM GOES ON TO DEMONSTRATE THE FIRST 30 MINUTES OF THE LEON S. KENNEDY ARC OF *RESIDENT EVIL 6*. Caught in Tall Oaks University during a bio-terrorist outbreak, Leon and partner Helena Harper explore the largely abandoned campus after some unfortunate business about having to shoot the president. There's something very Spencer Mansion-like about the building – perfect for setting veteran *Resident Evil* players on edge – and Capcom does a great job of exploiting that to keep the tension racking up with each room. Lighting effects are used beautifully to control what the player can and can't see, with the occasional lightning strike illuminating a corridor or bay window for just a split-second, long enough to convince you that you saw something or simply make you jump.

After a few minutes we realise that not a single zombie has been thrown at the player yet. Instead, Capcom uses the time to build anticipation of that first encounter, drawing out the wait long enough that every fake scare makes the heart jump that little bit further into the throat. At one point, Leon and Helena happen upon a distressed man, looking for his missing daughter. Leon agrees to help, despite Helena's protests, and follows the man through the corridors, his own torchlight, cleverly out of the player's control, adding another layer of unnerving atmosphere to the environment. And when you do find his daughter, Liz, the reveal is masterfully handled.

The sound of piano music in the distance not only evokes the original game's use of 'Moonlight Sonata', but lends an equally eerie-



EVERY CHARACTER, INCLUDING THE AI PARTNERS, HAS THEIR OWN PERSONAL MELEE ATTACKS. AT ONE POINT WE SEE HELENA PERFORM AN ELBOW DROP ON A FALLEN ZOMBIE. POOR THING.



DURING OUR conversation with Eiichiro Sasaki, the *Resident Evil 6* director expresses some concern that the game's near-30-hour length might be too much for an audience of *Call Of Duty* fans weaned on five-hour long campaigns. We rationalise that most people buying *COD* do so for the infinite replayability of its online multiplayer, and Sasaki nods. Really though, it's a fact that Capcom may already be aware of. How else could we explain that new *RE6* players will no longer be required to complete the game to unlock the Mercenaries mode?

Anyone who's fully played through *RE4* or *5* will already be in love with The Mercenaries. Over the years, this 'bonus mode' has become one of the most beloved staples of *Resident Evil*, to the point where it has been made into a game in its own right. But will *RE6*'s version of The Mercenaries live up to previous iterations?

In its bid to extend online play time and, presumably, reduce the number of people who trade in *RE6*, Capcom may look to add some longevity to its score attack game with a *COD*-style progression system. Which may not be such a good idea. The nature of a score attack game relies on the control of every variable, after all, and the last time Capcom tried to monkey with the formula of its minigame, in *The Mercenaries 3D*, it arguably spoiled much of what originally made the game great. Furthermore, confirmation that some Mercenaries maps will be retailer-exclusive pre-order incentives is certainly not the sort of news that will make fans happy.

This is all speculation, but one thing we can look forward to is the appearance of classic *Resi* characters not seen in the main campaign. There's no confirmation of exactly who'll appear this time but, Sasaki teases us with the revelation that the top three most requested Mercenaries characters are Hunk, Barry Burton and, bizarrely, Alex Wesker – a character not yet shown and only detailed in *Resident Evil 5: Gold Edition*'s bonus contents.



THE THREE STORIES OF RESIDENT EVIL 6

LEON & HELENA

The star of *Resident Evil 2* and *4* begins *RE6* in the university of American town Tall Oaks, where the president is about to announce his zero tolerance stance against bio-terrorism. The speech never happens, however, as an outbreak of the new C-Virus causes chaos in the town and transforms the president into a zombie. After Leon kills President Evil, he and new Secret Service partner Helena Harper feel that they may be framed for his murder, so set off on an investigation to determine who caused the outbreak.

As Leon and Helena explore Tall Oaks, they discover that the town has been surrounded by a mysterious fog that Capcom tells us is crucial to the plot. Could the fog be a bio-terrorist device for spreading the C-Virus? Probably, yes.

One of the most distinctive parts of Leon and Helena's story is that it doesn't take place during the aftermath of an outbreak, as in previous games, but right as the outbreak is happening. Leon will see innocent people killed by zombies, and he'll even see the horror of their transformation. While walking over dead bodies during the opening minutes of the game, we hear him say, "I wonder how much time we have before these corpses are on their feet."

CHRIS & PIERS

Chris's story begins six months before the main plot of *Resident Evil 6*, and sees him on a mission with new BSAA partner Piers Nivan – one that we're told will have huge ramifications for his character. We're not told exactly what happens on that mission, but the events are so serious, says Sasaki, that, "It's something that will really impact his life, the way he makes decisions, and the way he thinks about fighting bio-terrorism. So what you're going to see from Chris in this game is a Chris that you're probably not familiar with. The Chris we meet in China is not the one we're accustomed to." The death of a close friend perhaps? The absence of other BSAA agents Jill Valentine or Sheva Alomar suggest that may be the case.

Dialogue in the trailer between Chris and Piers suggest that these perspective-changing events will take Chris down a path that causes a lot of conflict between he and his partner, and may lead him to question the motives of the BSAA. He also seems to have lost a little weight in the years between *Resi 5* and *6*. His arms are no longer as thick as tree trunks, so don't expect him to go punching boulders to bits as much as he used to.

JAKE & SHERRY

New character Jake Muller is joined by an old friend, *Resident Evil 2*'s Sherry Birkin. And though Capcom claims that this pair of characters are very different, they actually have a lot in common. Both have troubled parents – Sherry's father was William Birkin, the scientist transformed into a Tyrant in *RE2*, while Jake is the illegitimate son of series supervillain Albert Wesker. Both characters have inherited a level of virus immunity from their fathers, making them crucially important to the events of *Resident Evil 6*.

Jake's story begins in the fictional Eastern European country of Edonia, where he has joined the civil war as a mercenary in order to earn money for his mother, but when Sherry discovers and locates him, she convinces Jake to join her cause, for a price. Sherry's motives are clearly honourable – she wants to eliminate the C-virus – but Jake's mercenary traits make him more ambiguous. And, as a member of the Wesker bloodline, it raises questions about whether he'll always fight on the side of good.



THERE'S A FANTASTIC LEVEL OF ANIMATION TO THE PROTAGONISTS THAT SEEMS INSPIRED BY SONY'S *UNCHARTED*. LEON REACTS TO AND INTERACTS WITH HIS SURROUNDINGS LIKE NATHAN DRAKE, LEANING AGAINST WALLS AND TOUCHING DOOR FRAMES IN A WAY THAT FEELS LIKE HE'S REALLY THERE.

RESIDENT EVIL 6 IS SURELY CAPCOM'S MOST EXPENSIVE PRODUCTION TO DATE. 150 INTERNAL STAFF WORKED ON THE GAME. ADD ON THE EXTERNAL STAFF HIRED TO HELP, AND THE FULL DEVELOPMENT TEAM IS A WHOPPING 600 PEOPLE.

but-beautiful quality to your exploration of the campus. Reach the piano and it's unsettling that there's no one actually playing it. Instead, a pair of corpses are slumped on the left, a big streak of blood in the carpet suggesting that they were dragged there. Suddenly, Liz jumps into view as the sound of a plucked violin string emphasises the shock.

Liz is alive, but her erratic behaviour suggests that she's not entirely all there. Moments later, the four of you bundle into an elevator and soon wish you hadn't as the lights go out, plunging the tight space into pitch black. Within the darkness, a scream is heard, followed by a gruesome squelching noise that could only mean one thing. Liz has turned into a zombie and she's feasting on her father. Sure enough, as the lights come up again, the zombiefied Liz stares right back up at Leon, her father's blood seeping from between her teeth as she bares them like an animal.

IT'S A SCENE WITH ENOUGH SHOCK VALUE TO RIVAL EVEN THE FIRST GAME'S ICONIC MOMENT WHERE YOU FIND BRAVO TEAM'S KENNETH BEING EATEN BY A ZOMBIE. Only what happens next is much more affecting. There's no calmly back-pedalling down a hallway while you carefully shoot at a creature moving slower than your grandma this time. Instead, zombie Liz lunges at Leon with terrifying speed, and within the claustrophobic confines of the elevator, there's no room to escape. It's a desperate struggle for survival as the player manipulates the analogue stick against a wildly swinging on-screen pendulum in an effort to line up a headshot and prevent Leon's untimely end. Even watching someone else play through this, we find ourselves breathless until it's all over.

WE'RE TRYING TO MAKE ALL THIS HORROR AND TENSION SOMETHING YOU FEEL AS YOU'RE HOLDING THE CONTROLS

Moments like this are exactly what Sasaki is referring to when he says, "We're trying to bring the horror element back to *Resident Evil*." "To do that," he says, "it can't be something in the background; it has to be immediate. It has to be when you are actually playing the game. So we're trying to make all this horror and tension something you feel as you're holding the controls, as you are playing as these characters."

For all its efforts to recapture the old feeling of survival-horror, however, *Resident Evil 6* is fuelled by a forward momentum not seen since the surprising reinvention of *RE4*. In many ways, this is the most action-packed entry in the series to date, though it seems to keep the action more tightly wound to its genre's pillars than *RE5* did. As Leon and Helena emerge from the elevator, for example, they're immediately attacked by a mass of zombies right outside. As they tumble over each other to get at our heroes' throats, Leon manages to push them all backwards at once with a well-timed roundhouse so swift and powerful it's almost a hurricane kick. It's a handy move when caught in a tight spot, but Sasaki promises that such attacks won't be open to abuse, and should therefore avoid any feeling of over empowerment. "We have something called the physical combat gauge for your stamina," he explains. "Every time you do one of your martial arts attacks it uses up some of your physical combat gauge. You have to manage that because if you use lots of attacks and go through your gauge you won't have it when you really need it."

And boy, will Leon need it. The section that follows is an escape sequence through the underground car park of the university. It recalls Leon's debut, in which he ran for his life through the streets of Raccoon City in *Resident Evil 2*, not just because of the crashed police car whose siren annoyingly blares over the carnage but also because of the sheer number of zombies that herd toward him. Unlike that game, however, simply running to safety isn't the only option, and it certainly wouldn't be the most fun.

It's unclear if Taoka is playing down his expertise in order to demonstrate the full breadth of the gameplay or if *Resident Evil 6* really is that tough but, nevertheless, he soon finds himself on

the defensive. A couple of unexpected attacks send Leon straight towards the floor and, in a desperate bid for survival, he has to shuffle backwards along the tarmac on his backside until there's enough room for him to safely pick off the zombies with his handgun. The word 'overpowered' doesn't even come into it. He's lucky to wield any power whatsoever under these circumstances, especially as these are a much deadlier breed of zombie than those he encountered back in 1998.

DESPITE ITS NAME, *RESIDENT EVIL 6* IS ACTUALLY THE NINTH CANONICAL GAME IN THE SERIES, INCLUDING *RE0*, *CODE VERONICA* AND *REVELATIONS*. NEVERTHELESS, CAPCOM ASSURES US THAT NO KNOWLEDGE OF PREVIOUS GAMES' STORY IS NECESSARY TO ENJOY *RE6*.

MUCH LIKE THE ROMERO CREATIONS OF *DAWN OF THE DEAD*, THESE ZOMBIES CLING ON TO PRIMITIVE PARTS OF THEIR FORMER LIVES, MAKING THEM A LITTLE MORE FORMIDABLE THAN BEFORE. For example, says Capcom, if a person is using a weapon like a shovel or a club to defend themselves before death then they may still hold onto that weapon and swing it around as a zombie. They also seem a little less predictable now. At one point, Leon shoots a female zombie, who slumps to her knees following a single bullet to the chest. She seems lifeless enough until, several seconds later, she rises to her feet once more with a groan. The bullet wound didn't stop her, but it has left a horribly noticeable gash in her chest – a level of detail unprecedented in *Resident Evil*, and a great addition to the game's macabre repertoire. Taoko doesn't allow the zombie to fool him a second time. A kick to the chest keeps her unbalanced enough to slow her down; another shot, another kick for good measure, and a bullet to the skull finally send her back into the afterlife.

As with any *Resident Evil* game, of course, zombies are just one of many virus-infected enemies. We're not privileged enough to be shown any of the bosses, or the new signature enemy that Sasaki promises will be just as terrifying as *RE4*'s chainsaw-wielding Dr Salvador or *RE5*'s Executioner, but we are shown a new enemy type: the J'avo. If you've seen either of *RE6*'s trailers then you'll be familiar with these gruesome new monstrosities. The J'avo are much faster and smarter than your traditional zombie and more powerful than *RE4*'s Ganados. They're capable of regeneration and, like the Tyrants of old *Resident Evil* games, can mutate into greater threats.

THE REASON WE IMPLEMENTED THE MUTATIONS IS BECAUSE WE WANT TO ENHANCE THE COMBAT EXPERIENCE

"When you shoot them in a body part, that body part will regenerate as something mutated," says producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi. "We've shown two mutations so far. One of them is that the arm turns into a scythe and the other is a big arm that reaches out and grabs you, but there are many more. The reason we implemented the mutations is because we want to enhance the combat experience. Part of it is visual. When you're fighting these J'avo you never know what they're going to transform into, and that can be both exciting and horrific for the player. But it can also be part of the action. For example, the J'avo can use weapons and guns. So it could be shooting at you, but then you shoot its arm off and it becomes a scythe. So now the action has changed. Before it was shooting at you from a distance; now it's running up and trying to get in close to cut you. So the way you fight that J'avo changes. While you're fighting a bunch of J'avo, the way you damage them will affect the way they mutate and, depending on how they mutate, that affects the way they attack you. So there's always a sense of tension."

Having not seen the J'avo in action ourselves, we'll have to take Hirabayashi's word for it. But then there's still an awful lot of *Resident Evil 6* we're yet to see. The demonstration of Leon's chapter represents just a fraction of his full story, and that in turn is only a third of the main game. Indeed, *Resident Evil 6* returns to one of the most missed features of the franchise's history – multiple playable stories. While recent games certainly allowed players to take control of lots of different characters, they lacked the significance of the approach taken in the first two games. Choosing between Chris or Jill in the first game, for example, wasn't just about picking a favourite character; it took the player on a different route through the mansion, giving them a slightly different arsenal, different dialogue and even their own exclusive

IN CONTRAST TO THE SLOPPY VOICE ACTING OF EARLIER *RESIDENT EVIL* TITLES, *RE6* IS MADE BY A TEAM THAT WANTS TO GRAB A WESTERN AUDIENCE WITH ITS BEST LOCALISATION YET. THE ENGLISH SCRIPT WAS, ACCORDING TO SASAKI, WRITTEN BY AN EXPERIENCED HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITER.

XBOX LIVE AFTER DEATH

WITH TWO protagonists in each story, it's only natural that co-op gameplay will return in *Resident Evil 6* and, as in *RE5*, it will work both online and off. Capcom is promising a number of improvements to the mode, including proper drop-in, drop-out multiplayer so that new players can join a game in progress without having to hang around in lobbies or drop the main player back to a previous checkpoint. In offline split-screen, players will be able to make the best use of limited screen space by customising the layout of both screens and HUD details. Which is nice.

What other online play modes will feature? We know that The Mercenaries will return once more, and don't be surprised to see the popular Raid mode from *Resident Evil: Revelations* make its console debut. If rumours of a new six-player co-op option are true then it's sure to be implemented in this Horde-like minigame.







GREEN AND RED HERBS ARE A STAPLE PART OF *RESIDENT EVIL*, AND THEY RETURN YET AGAIN. THEY CAN BE MIXED TOGETHER TO MAKE HEALING TABLETS, AND THERE'S NOW A TABLET BUTTON SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIDDLE THROUGH THE MENUS IN A PINCH.

scenes and challenges. *Resident Evil 2*'s highly ambitious zapping system, meanwhile, upped the ante further by allowing actions made in Leon's playthrough to directly affect that of Claire, and vice versa.

R*ESIDENT EVIL 6* NOT ONLY RETURNS TO THIS INNOVATIVE DYNAMIC, IT ALSO DOES IT BIGGER THAN EVER WITH THREE PROTAGONISTS, EACH WITH THEIR OWN STORY, WHICH CAN BE PLAYED IN ANY ORDER THE PLAYER DESIRES. It's unclear if that means a return to the zapping system, or something closer to the style of the first game, but Sasaki's cryptic answer to our probing suggests that the team is approaching this element with the same ambition as the rest of the game. "Because we do have three characters and three stories, we had to implement them in the game in such a way that they wouldn't affect it negatively," he explains. "What form that will take, we can't go into the specifics of just yet, but if you use your imagination you may be able to picture how these stories are connected and what we're trying to achieve. We'll be making more announcements about what exactly that entails as we get closer to the release date, but the stories are tied together. It's not just story and cut-scenes for each character on their own. There is a connection."

What the team is willing to confirm, however, is that each of the stories, which individually star Leon, Chris Redfield and new character Jake Muller, will also feature their own gameplay systems unique to those characters. "There are a couple of ways we're trying to differentiate the stories in the game," says Hirabayashi. "For example, we're trying to incorporate horror elements into all the stories. But as you know, horror is a big genre and there are different types of horror. So Leon's story is more traditional Gothic horror, Chris is in battle and as he fights his way and moves forward the things that he encounters are horrific in their own way. Jake is trying to escape from the country he was in, so he's being chased and followed. So there's that certain tension and horror element to his story that is different to that of Chris or Leon. We're trying to present a different iteration of horror in each of the stories. As far as gameplay goes, there are the core gameplay concepts but each character has their own unique gameplay features. So when you play as a different character you'll be able to do different things that you couldn't do with others."

"If you look at the characters in this game you'll see differences in the way you can use them," adds Sasaki. "If you look at what Jake does, he's not always using a gun. So because of that, the way you control him is going to be different throughout his levels. If you compare the newest trailer to the first one you'll see there are many cases where Jake is not using a gun, so what that means for the player and how you control him is very exciting."

On trailer evidence alone, Jake Muller's hand-to-hand gameplay appears to represent the most radical departure from what we traditionally think of *Resident Evil*. Will it divide the fan base? Possibly, but then this is a series that's never been afraid to introduce new gameplay devices and throw out old ones wherever necessary. Like the J'avo, this is a series designed to evolve and adapt to new situations, so there's no sense in worrying about tradition. The bigger concern is whether such a different style of gameplay can be effectively woven into *Resident Evil 6* in such a way that Jake's chapter still manages to keep players on the back foot, scared and vulnerable. But the confidence of the development team indicates that they already know they've achieved greatness. "We're delivering a big package here," says Kobayashi. "Everything you've loved about past *Resident Evil* games, we're maxing that out and trying to put it into this game to deliver something really huge, something you haven't experienced before."

And even if Jake's chapter fails to pass muster, there are two other chapters that, on current evidence, may very well raise the bar far above any other contemporary survival-horror. And yes, that includes *Dead Space 2*.

ALTHOUGH EACH OF THE THREE STORIES STARTS IN A DIFFERENT LOCATION, THEY WILL ALL APPARENTLY CONCLUDE IN CHINA AS THE FATES OF THEIR PROTAGONISTS ARE DRAWN TOGETHER.


MASSIVELY



AMBITIOUS

THE MAKER OF ONE OF THE MOST INACCESSIBLE MMOS EVER CREATED HAS TURNED ITS ATTENTION TOWARD A FREE-TO-PLAY FPS FOR PLAYSTATION 3. IS EVE ONLINE DEVELOPER CCP GAMES READY TO GO MAINSTREAM? GAMES™ HEADS TO ICELAND TO FIND OUT

TITLE: Dust 514 FORMAT: PlayStation 3 PUBLISHER: CCP Games DEVELOPER: In-house RELEASE: Summer

The on-screen communications window of a battle cruiser signals the broadcast of a group of marines on a planet surface, outnumbered and outgunned. Storming its way through the galaxy towards the planet, and even engaging in a brief firefight with an enemy spaceship in its way, the craft finally looms large over the desert world surface below. As its cannons warm up with an increasingly electric blue glow, the craft positions itself directly above a pinpoint location on the continent below. After a few seconds, several piercing bolts of laser energy silently lance their way from the nose of the ship, escaping the vacuum of space and piercing the atmosphere of the planet.

Cut to the surface. A deafening roar splits the air, as the heavens are divided by those pillars of destructive energy. The base is enveloped in explosions, and when the dust settles, around ten seconds later, intel reports the base is deserted. The battalion of marines cheers. And so does a room of hundreds of *Eve Online* fans, as FanFest 2012 in Reykjavík, Iceland, erupts into frenzy.

A small part of the future has just been witnessed, and the air is as electric as that laser discharge. The marines, of course, are a group of players in CCP Games' *Dust 514*, a massively multiplayer, free-to-play shooter that's heading exclusively to PlayStation 3. The battle cruiser, revealed in a giddy split-screen display half way through the team's assault on the base, is operating in CCP's existing, PC-based *Eve Online*. The interaction alone of two such different game worlds across two different gaming formats leaves a warm glow of tech nerd euphoria, but it's the gameplay potential that this act of intergalactic mass destruction represents that's the most mouth-watering.

It's easy to get lost in the heady ambition of this aspect of the game, of course; two overlapping games and genres innately affecting each other, wrapping and twisting their philosophies, economies and politics around one another to develop an ongoing space drama that spans the heavens and the earth. But to the average PS3 player, who's unfamiliar with the majesty of the Amarr Empire or the machinations of the Serpentis Cartel, the overriding question is this: will *Dust 514* actually be a good shooter? Further, how can a team with no experience in the art of the FPS even begin to guarantee this?

"We didn't just dive into this head-first," insists CCP Games' chief technical officer, Halldor Fannar, a genial Icelander who speaks with a Silicon Valley-induced California twang. "It was a lot of thinking, and a realisation that we'd just have to hire the experts. So we've hired a lot of great people that have an impressive track record of console games, and even shooters as well."

Fannar reels off an impressive list of development talent – various *Battlefield* and *Ghost Recon* veterans are working away on *Dust* over at CCP's Shanghai studio, while its Newcastle branch – which back through the mists of time was once *Syndicate* studio Bullfrog – is also bringing over twenty years of action and strategy experience to the party. And Fannar is adamant that the FPS experience is the be-all and end-all of *Dust 514*.

"We've always been clear that we'd first have to make a triple-A first-person shooter," he explains. "Don't tag any of the other acronyms – just do that. Because if you don't get that right, beyond that, you won't experience anything else. Because the second layer is persistence, and the third layer is the connection to *Eve*. If we did it the other way round, we've gotten it backwards. Because if you never got the shooter competitive with other things, you'd never experience the rest; it's very important that we get the first part right."

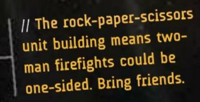
To that end, *Dust 514* isn't skimping on the details, and it's the subtleties that need to be embraced to fully understand where CCP is coming from. Played on a basic level, this is all-too familiar territory. Armoured marines, three-man buggies, small fortresses kitted out with stairs, slopes and copious cover opportunities are bread and butter. But it's a high-quality core dynamic – precise, muscular and satisfying. Built on the Unreal 3 Engine, it's clearly the product of a team that's kept a close eye on what everybody around it has been achieving since *Dust 514*'s announcement in 2009.

And it's free to play, of course. That's the way CCP will hook players in. And it's Fannar's "second layer" – that promised persistence – that's intended to keep them there. "The most important thing that *Dust* will offer is you don't have this amnesia that you have in shooters today," he says. "Which means that you finish your game and then you start again, there's no consequence for what just happened. You just do it over and over again."

// This guy's not much of a runner, but his massive gun and tank-like armour more than make up for this immobility.

//WE'VE HIRED A LOT OF GREAT PEOPLE THAT HAVE AN IMPRESSIVE TRACK RECORD OF CONSOLE GAMES, AND EVEN SHOOTERS//





// The rock-paper-scissors unit building means two-man firefights could be one-sided. Bring friends.



// While *Dust 514*'s maps will begin as hospitable locations, CCP intends later to play around with more dangerous, alien environs.

When Worlds Collide

What happens in Eve doesn't necessarily stay in Eve...

// IT'S PERHAPS SAD to reflect that, despite the groundbreaking demonstrations and presentations that took place at FanFest 2012, the most newsworthy event was an apparent episode of bullying. Alex Gianturco – known in-game as The Mittani – lived up to his character's villainous reputation by seeming to try and rouse an assembled fan panel into a round of bullying against another player who'd expressed a temptation to commit suicide, in order to make him carry out the deed. While Gianturco later apologised on forums, stating he was "so smashed" he didn't even remember the details of his outburst, the scandal joins a litany of similar incidents in which lax moderation of CCP's universe has led to miniature fan uprisings. 'Monoclegate', for example, hit the community back in summer 2011. An $80 virtual eyepiece for in-game characters to wear became the symbol of a new wave of purchasable character attire that far outstripped its perceived worth. Players voted with their feet, as subscriptions fell by 8 per cent. Many say CCP's coffers have only just recovered.

"Other shooters have a beautifully crafted single-player campaign, but that's not what we're about. We're about people creating the content. So what *Dust* delivers that the other ones aren't delivering is the persistence in evolution – you evolve your character and train your character, gain skills. This investment is actually paying you back. You're part of this whole space opera, and everything in the game happens for a reason. If you want to change it, go ahead and change it."

games™ is offered an almost bewildering array of examples of character and weapon customisations. Take the standard grunt setup – the default Assault Drop Suit body armour, an Assault Rifle, and a low-damage, local area Locus Grenade. This is infantry at its most raw, but as a variety of options are added to the loadout matrix, it becomes clear that given time, experience points and in-game currency, a *Dust 514* player won't just transcend the class system; they'll actually begin to create their own. From lightly-armoured scouts, to snipers, to chaingun-toting anti-infantry hulks who can't even run due to the bulk of their defence, it's hugely apparent that *Dust 514* is going to evolve as one of the console's more cerebral squad shooters. While crafting a respectable core shooter, CCP has clearly brought more than a fair share of the complexities it's used to pouring into the *Eve* universe.

Dust takes this building block mentality through to its use of vehicles, too. Using in-game currency your mercenary squad has won from previous battles, it's possible to drop a variety of war machines into the game's maps, some of which occupy two-mile-wide geographic areas. Where this differs from the likes of *Battlefield* or *Homefront* is that, like troops, this mobile ordnance is equally as customisable.

From light, hovering support units to added ion and particle cannons crafting a 'Marauder' heavy attack vehicle, the formula again is a logical addition of parts to change possibilities on the fly. This component chain also unlocks the potential for a rock-paper-scissors style relationship between unit interactions.



A given example, which set the assembled players whooping almost as much as the earlier Hammer of Dawn-like space laser strike, was two uniquely skilled troopers coming together to take down a Close Air Support unit. A Heavy Dropsuit-wearing marine could wield a powerful Force Gun to instantly smash the mechanised hover unit, but it moves too fast for the charge-up time of his weapon to stand a chance. Luckily, a nearby light trooper is equipped with a Web Generator, easily holding the Close Air Support unit within its energy shield net until the Heavy can land a shot.

The idea, clearly, is that marine units will start to develop styles of play not just individually, but as a group. And while that's a philosophy that's never quite worked in *Battlefield*, it's the wider context of the *Eve* universe, hopes CCP, that will be the glue that holds that companionship together.

"What a *Dust* player can do," enthuses Fannar, "is, with his band of merry mates, they

can win battles on a planet, and ultimately take over a planet. They can decide to do that as a group, and they can own the planet themselves. They can then establish a relationship of trust with a corporation in *Eve*, where they now start sending up resources that they harvest from the planet through the space elevator up to the *Eve* players. The *Eve* players then pay money for that, and *Dust* now becomes an exchange, right?" Fannar smiles. "Of course, at some point, somebody decides to screw somebody over..."

And it's with that cryptic hint that Fannar reminds us of *Dust*'s legacy, and potential future. *Eve*'s is a torrid and corrupt universe. Rife with legitimate real-world nationalistic rivalry, subterfuge and drama (see When Worlds Collide) it's a gamescape that CCP has left to build itself for so long, at times it's become an ugly mirror image of our own world. If CCP's claims come good, *Dust* players could find themselves joining bands of marines that pull the twisting, turning intrigues of outer space down to the surface to fully inform each and every choice a player makes. 'Your next shot will topple enemies' was the running motto for CCP's presentations, and it's determined to bear this out. While details of *Dust*'s microtransaction-based economy are still sketchy, CCP has confirmed there will be rare, premium items, not to mention similarly scant resources with which to craft them. The financial concerns of those up in the sky will almost certainly affect those on the ground just as keenly.

And that's just the near future. After its closed beta, currently running on PlayStation Network, and subsequent launch this summer, Fannar sees the *Dust* and *Eve* story expanding exponentially beyond current boundaries. The orbital bombardment dynamic is actually – beyond *Eve* and *Dust 514* sharing voice and text chat – the only meaningful interaction currently available between the two games at launch. "Instead of opening up the connection and just having people drink from the firehose, we're just turning it on ever so slightly. We're just starting like that," reasons Fannar.

Beyond this, though, the first concrete plan is to expand the range of genuine *Eve* planet locations for battle in *Dust*. "We'll just be opening up the temperate planets at the moment, the ones that have atmospheres similar to Earth," explains Fannar, "But eventually we foresee that we will expand it with new technology that lets soldiers start fighting on the lava planets and the ice planets." Whereas the player limit per game currently lies at 24 versus 24, CCP is hoping to far exceed this figure in the future, pushing PS3 technology ever further by "optimising existing things". On the way to achieving this console alchemy, the *Dust 514* team is also now ready to tackle the small matter of PS Vita support.





// One day, CCP hopes that every one of these overhead ships will be controlled by players on different gaming formats.

"We really want to just start out small, get things going, and see how people respond to it," says Fannar. "You could use the Vita as a droid in the game, that flies around, and you could fly around corners and peek, and then you could use it as your controller for the game, which would be kind of cool, because now you have an extra window letting you see around corners. Another thing that's compelling is, if you've seen the orbital bombardment, the player has this Cortex, the device on their arm, so I thought it would be kind of cool, because all the applications that we're thinking about were kind of smaller, fun, free applications, so it would be kind of cool if the Cortex *was* your Vita, and we just provided a way to strap it to your arm as a touchscreen, so you could actually provide the launch co-ordinates just by touching it, which is pretty cool.

//IT DEPENDS ON HOW THESE PLATFORMS ARE GOING TO FARE, AND WHAT'S THEN GOING TO HAPPEN WITH THE PLAYSTATION 4//

"And even though you could argue, 'Okay, what's the install base for this?' It's not going to be great, right, but we could make this application pretty cheaply so I think it could be worth it. So you could take it even further, that once we have more experience with the Vita, and we understand more of that market segment of what a gamer enjoys, then I don't see a reason why we couldn't provide a standalone experience for Vita. Why not? A third layer – for example, atmosphere flight could be on the Vita. That doesn't yet exist in *Eve* or *Dust*."

But technologically impressive as Vita is, why not just put Dust on the Vita, as had been originally rumoured? "When *Dust 514* was initially designed, the Vita was not known," states Fannar. "But it's really interesting to look at the specs, and I would say the answer has to be this: our goal is always to keep our game – *Eve* – so that it always lives on. And there's no reason we shouldn't be the same with *Dust 514*. So if the Vita lives on, as the PlayStation 3 fades away, then we should move with it. It depends on how these platforms are going to fare, and what's then going to happen with the PlayStation 4."

Beyond that, tablets, phones and other "vectors" of input are planned to give any player, on any console and with any specialist interest, an in-road into *Eve*. "We're already experimenting with different things we can do," says Fannar. "It's going to be hard, but we're still going to try."

There seems little finer way to sum up CCP Games' philosophy. This was a team of 45 people who went on to quietly craft a virtual community with a larger population than its native Iceland. Several years later, it broke the cross-platform gaming barrier at a fan convention on a Thursday afternoon. Without fanfare or undue media hype, CCP Games has built a multi-layered universe. Give it five more years, and we just might all be living there.

// Hugely customisable units will enable players to match their individual playing style to different weapon and armour loadouts at every respawn.



// This base could conceivably be captured by calling a chum in *Eve* and having them laser it to smithereens from space.

Niche Thinking

Dust 514's PS3 exclusivity challenged

// While *Dust 514*'s presence on the PS3 makes technological sense, it's a source of consternation that the title won't hit *Eve Online*'s native PC. Halldor Fannar explains that the choice is surprisingly philosophical: "We didn't want to cannibalise our existing player base. So even though we understood they would like to play it, we were kind of like, 'Well, you can if you get a PlayStation 3, but also it's maybe not for you. You already love the experience you have with *Eve*, that you're willing to invest all this time. We're trying to reach more people, right? We've always found – and we've said this openly to our players – we believe that *Eve* is a better game with more people in it."


Open
Close
Push
Pull
Walk to
Pick up
Talk to
Give
Use
Look at
Turn on
Turn off
THE EDISONS ARE AT IT AGAIN.
Dumbland
BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY
MEXICAN FOLKWAYS
THE STUDY OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE
LITTLE NEMO
ROGUE LEADERS THE STORY OF LUCASARTS



The Secret Of DOUBLE FINE'S SUCCESS

DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS ASKED ITS FANS FOR $400,000 TO MAKE A NEW ADVENTURE GAME. IT RECEIVED $3.5 MILLION. STUDIO HEAD TIM SCHAFER DETAILS THE FEELGOOD STORY OF THE YEAR

Tim Schafer is no stranger to the bizarre. From a time-travel throwdown with a huge purple tentacle to a film noir take on Mexico's Day of the Dead, from a psychic kids' summer camp to an alternate reality ruled by heavy metal rockers, he's brought us some of the weirdest and most creative videogame stories of the past two decades. But none of those tales can top the strange, true story he set in motion on 8 February, when he turned to Kickstarter to fund Double Fine's next project.

Schafer's modest request to fans: donate $400,000, and Double Fine would create a "classic" point-and-click adventure like the LucasArts games of the Nineties, with film company 2 Player Productions capturing the whole process on camera. "I was really nervous about asking for $300,000 for the game and $100,000 for the documentary," Schafer later admits. That first day, he simply hoped to earn a few thousand dollars by bedtime. "It was crazy. We were rushing off to a pitch meeting or something, and we were like, 'I think we have time to launch this... Let's launch it, let's just push the button. I remember pressing 'Go', and by the time the page came up it had $30 on it. And I was like, 'Huh, that's weird.' Then we ran off to our meeting, and when we came back we were like, 'Holy...' And by the time I went to bed, we had met our goal of $400,000. That's when I knew it was going to be an exciting ride."

And it was. Within eight hours, Double Fine's campaign met its initial goal; less than a day into the 35-day campaign, it surpassed $1 million. By the time

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: LIZA HEIDER www.lizaheider.com

the campaign closed on 13 March, the *Double Fine Adventure* had collected just under $3.5 million – more than 800 per cent over the original request – with more than 87,000 backers pitching in.

Never mind that Schafer had no concrete plans for the game itself – his backers were throwing money at a promise. Perhaps the strangest element of this story is that this incredible outpouring of support was for an adventure game, a so-called niche genre that fell out of mainstream popularity over a decade ago. (Schafer himself hasn't designed one since *Grim Fandango* in 1998.) "These days it seems like adventure games are a bit of a lost art form," he quipped in his Kickstarter video. "They exist in our dreams and our memories… and Germany."

So why is now the right time to go another round? Ironically, the passage of time has something to do with it. "There is a whole generation of people who are now adults, who were kids when they first played this stuff," Schafer says of point-and-click classics like *Monkey Island* and *Full Throttle*. "The games you played when you were 12 will always be magic for you. Now they get to participate in making something that was supposedly never going to happen again. And in the time that's gone by they've all forgotten about *Monkey Island 2*'s monkey wrench puzzle."

He also believes that many backers are fed up with the lack of variety in triple-A releases, a monotony that stems from publishers' attempts to mitigate risk and avoid costly flops. "There's a lot more push towards licences and sequels; it gets worse every year. The idea of launching a new IP with a triple-A budget – I would be scared! That means there's less diversity in the choices for gamers, and I think some gamers felt underserved. They felt like, 'I'm not getting any choice. Maybe it's a niche market, but isn't there some way I could still get it?' Because you can still be profitable in a niche market as long as you budget accordingly and organise those people."

He adds that even though digital distribution has helped Double Fine and other developers take some control of this situation, the growing popularity of crowd funding plays a crucial role: "Kickstarter helped us organise those people, and reach them. And the fans made it happen. They were like, 'We want this,' got organised, and funded it – heroically." And then some.

With much more money than he expected, Schafer can rethink the project and expand its scope. Under the original $300,000 budget, "I think you could make a fun, cute, little game with the right two people and six months. People do it all the time. It still would have been an adventure game. It would have been better than our web-based one," he says of *Host Master And The Conquest Of Humor*, a freebie posted on the Double Fine website when Schafer hosted the Game Developers Choice Awards in 2009. "That was just one guy [Klint Honeychurch] doing the

Amnesia Fortnight to the rescue

■ AFTER 2009'S expensive *Brütal Legend*, Schafer has frequently credited Double Fine's smaller 'Amnesia Fortnight' projects with keeping the studio afloat. Dividing the company into four teams, he sent each off for two weeks to come up with a new game idea and design a prototype, to be presented to the company at the end of the fortnight. The games borne out of this experiment – which include *Stacking*, *Costume Quest*, *Iron Brigade* and *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster* – have allowed the studio to stretch its creative muscles and turn projects around more deftly than earlier, big-budget endeavours. "Pitching smaller games, asking for a lower budget, just lets you get away with a lot more – keeping your IP and having more creative control, you can do crazy stuff. That's been more appealing to us than what you have to give up when you ask for a lot of money. But also, it lets us not define our whole studio with every project we make, because we can make a Kinect game without announcing: 'We're just going to do Kinect games now.' Or: 'We're just doing kids' games now.' If we want to try stuff on iOS, or free-to-play, it's one of our teams instead of the whole company."







■ Double Fine immortalised the final hours of the Kickstarter campaign with a live stream from its San Francisco office. The campaign closed with just over $3.3 million in donations. Additional big-ticket contributions made directly to Double Fine brought the grand total to $3,446,371.



"We made it almost exactly like I wanted to," Schafer says of Double Fine's big-budget *Brütal Legend*. "I was just chasing inspiration, and I felt really grateful that I was able to follow that and make something out of that."

art and programming it, and me helping with the dialogue. He did that in a pretty short amount of time. But you could see how you could make something small; it doesn't have to have a million-dollar budget to be a fun adventure game. That's what I was planning: to do something modest and overcome its budget with charm." With the added funds comes added confidence: "Now it's a big relief, because that would have been a new kind of thing for me to make, and I don't know how to do that – a really, really small game. It's funny because everyone I've talked to has asked, 'So now, is the pressure on?' And I feel the exact opposite; I feel so relieved."

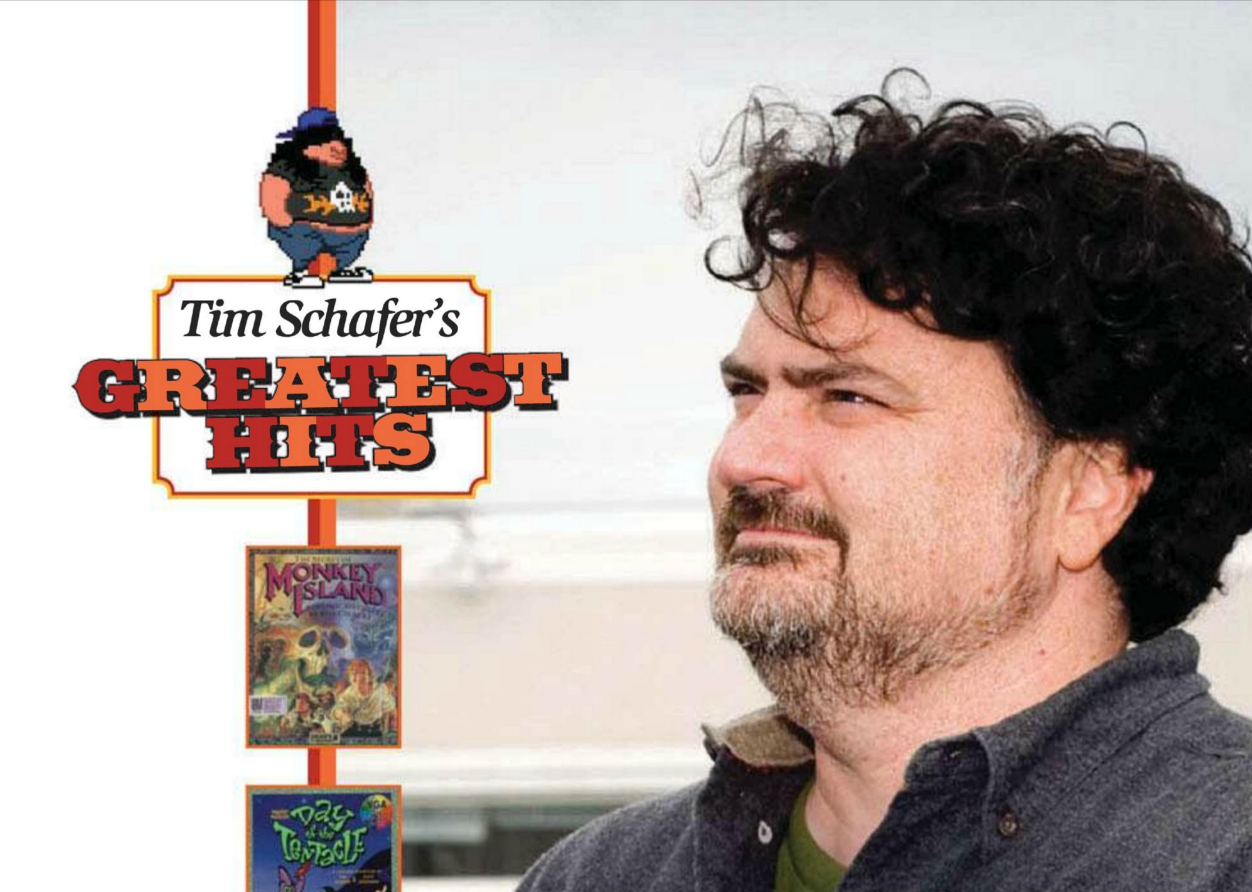
The higher budget brings the as-yet-unnamed *Double Fine Adventure* in line with the studio's recent 'Amnesia Fortnight' projects (see boxout), such as Russian nesting doll puzzler *Stacking* and Halloween-themed RPG *Costume Quest*, which both had $2 million budgets. "I think of it more as a year project now, which is what *Costume Quest* and *Stacking* were," Schafer says of his plans to expand the adventure's scope. "*Costume Quest* and *Stacking* didn't have voice, and I think this game should have voice – that would cost into the hundreds of thousands." With regards to the game's 2D artwork, he speculates that the extra money could go towards more animators to achieve "more character charm, characters in motion". And the game will now be translated into several languages and released on multiple platforms (PC, Mac, Linux, iOS and Android are confirmed so far).

When asked how the additional time and resources could impact the game's premise or gameplay, however, Schafer deflects: "I haven't started it yet. I don't know what it's going to be." He must have some ideas, at least? "I call them more 'feelings', floating around in the clouds. Inspirations and things," he says. "I really like this lonely, quiet phase. When you have such a big team, you have to keep everyone busy, so you can't bring everyone in at the beginning and talk about ideas. That's fine once you know a little bit and have the confidence. Now I'm in this phase where I'm not sure, it's still a little too… it's like the creature that's not ready to come out of its shell, because it's super soft. I'm in that egg phase where the idea is soft and hiding from everyone. That's kind of fun. I love collaborating with people, but it's also fun to do the opposite and be private with an idea for a while."

As his ideas solidify, Schafer will immerse himself in source material to evolve the

"The games you played when you were 12 will always be magic for you"

He and Ron Gilbert are used to working on adventure games, but Schafer admits the change of pace may prove challenging for others on the Double Fine team: "[Adventure games are] fun to brainstorm and design, they're fun in those moments where you're improvising new content, but people don't stay after hours to play them. Ever. No matter how good they are. No one's like, 'Oh, I can't wait to stay here tonight and play *Grim Fandango*,' because they wired up a puzzle all day."



Tim Schafer's GREATEST HITS

"I feel like I've not been prevented from making the games that I wanted to make, that much. I've been really lucky," Schafer says of his 20+ year game design career. "So when there's a question like 'What would you make if you could make anything?' or 'What if you had all the money in the world?', I've always had trouble answering that question because I feel like I've always lucked out and gotten to make what I wanted to make." Here are the highlights.



The Secret Of Monkey Island (1990)

■ For his first major project at LucasArts, Schafer teamed up with the legendary Ron Gilbert and Dave Grossman to provide writing and programming for the first instalment in what would become LucasArts' flagship adventure game franchise.

THE PLOT: Wannabe pirate Guybrush Threepwood undergoes three trials on his quest to become a bona fide swashbuckler.

Approximate budget: $135,000



Full Throttle (1995)

■ Schafer's first solo project at LucasArts, *Full Throttle* had a more cinematic presentation than its predecessors, with an evolved point-and-click interface, a rock soundtrack, and professional voice actors including Mark Hamill.

THE PLOT: Ben Throttle, leader of motorcycle gang the Polecats, faces off against a corrupt corporation in the desert to save his way of life.

Approximate budget: $1.5 million



Psychonauts (2005)

■ Double Fine's first game, *Psychonauts* wasn't a straight adventure, but a platformer with heavy story elements and Schafer's trademark sense of humour.

THE PLOT: Raz, a gifted young psychic, unravels a mystery at a summer camp for kids with extrasensory abilities, run by the US government. Levels take place inside other characters' minds, pitting you against their secret fears.

Approximate budget: $13 million



Day Of The Tentacle (1993)

■ Schafer co-designed this *Maniac Mansion* sequel with Dave Grossman (now at Telltale Games).

THE PLOT: Three teenagers travel through time to keep a giant purple tentacle from taking over the world by working with, among others, the US founding fathers. Microwaving a hamster is involved.

Approximate budget: $600,000

Grim Fandango (1998)

■ In Schafer's last adventure with LucasArts, the tried and true 2D graphics and point-and-click interface were replaced with 3D and direct control.

THE PLOT: Manny Calavera, a skeleton stylised after Mexican Day of the Dead figurines, is a travel agent who helps the recently deceased book passage to the underworld.

Approximate budget: $3 million



Brütal Legend (2009)

■ Schafer's "dream heavy metal" game, 15 years in the making: he came up with the title while working on *Monkey Island*. Its gameplay blends action with real-time strategy.

THE PLOT: Prophetic roadie Eddie Riggs leads mere mortals to victory against mythical creatures of darkness in a heavy-metal-inspired world.

Approximate budget: $24 million









■ Schafer laid out his grand plan in a comedic video that introduced the Kickstarter campaign. The *Double Fine Adventure* was only the third project in Kickstarter history to break $1 million. (Interestingly, the second reached this milestone just hours before Double Fine did.)

themes: "I like to absorb a lot of sources before we start on a game, to read or look at art books or watch movies. Like when I made *Grim Fandango*, I was reading a lot about the Day of the Dead and Mexican folklore, and going to a lot of film noir movies at the same time." Finally, he'll share his fledgling ideas with people he trusts, starting with fellow LucasArts alumnus and *Monkey Island* co-creator Ron Gilbert, who works at Double Fine in the office next door. "There's a whole path that I usually follow based on confidence and ideas and trust with collaborators," Schafer explains. "So I have kind of a weird idea, something I'm not even sure about, and first I don't tell anybody. And then I'll tell someone who I've learned is pretty supportive. Because sometimes you're wrong, and you haven't figured that out, and you don't want someone to tell you you're wrong. You just want someone to be like, 'Oh, that's cool,' and then you can get more confident down that path. And there are people I purposefully talk to last. But you eventually build up the confidence to approach that person, and you've also proved your idea by talking to all those other people, so you're ready to face them... ready to talk to a programmer, because they can be pretty blunt."

It's a creative process that Schafer both loves and finds fascinating; this is why he enlisted 2 Player Productions to make a documentary about the project. The 2 Player team, whose work includes *Penny Arcade: The Series* and *Minecraft: The Story Of Mojang*, will film at Double Fine's office to present what Schafer hopes will be a transparent look into the ups and downs of game development: "I'm trying to go completely open. This is an opportunity – I don't need to be concerned about any investors' feelings or trade secrets or anything. It's just, like, you bought the ticket and you get to see it."

"I'm really interested in making a living off of creative work," he continues. "It's a problem I'm always trying to solve, because it's kind of terrifying – like right now, this [the beginning of a project] used to be a really terrifying period for me. Now it's a little terrifying, but the blank page thing... you have to almost not think about the page; you have to think about something else when an idea comes to you, and I think that's interesting. And how you develop that into a real thing is interesting, and how you edit that. So I'm hoping, in the end, that it's a valuable document about creativity for anyone who wants to make a living off of creative work, because there's this aspect to it where it's not just about being wacky; it's about being really thoughtful and fighting for it, picking your fights and sticking with them. And when you go up against opposition, how do you not back down – choosing the things you should back down from and the things you shouldn't."

And if the fans don't like what they see? "I'm not sure how people are going to handle seeing that games are often really terrible for a while," Schafer says. "There's a long period where you're playing it and it's not fun. If they see that, they might go, 'Oh, I don't like the way this game is going.' That's the way people inside the company, publishers... a lot of people looking at a game get really anxious about it. It takes a lot of nerve and trust to see it through." He points out that backers won't only be watching, but will get to take an active role via the project's private community: "All along in the project, when there's things we can't decide on, we can always throw it to the fans. But we're still responsible for making the game good. We can't blame the backers and say, 'Well, you guys asked for this stuff...'"

Taking this collaboration a step further, one of the campaign's rewards will be beta access, via Steam, to all 87,142 backers. At that point, how much does Schafer expect player feedback to shape the final product? "An adventure game beta usually means you can play it from beginning to end, everything looks mostly good, sound is basically in. It's more looking for spots where people get stuck," he explains. "I think that beta stage for adventure games is about finding things that we didn't catch. Like on *Grim*, the signpost puzzle in the forest that no one could solve. If we knew that, we could put one hint in there." He adds that gauging the player experience is one of the biggest challenges while developing an adventure game: "Adventure games are like the coil of a spring that's been uncoiled and just can't be put back. There's no way for you to even know if it's fun. I think adventure games are best tested by giving it to someone who can go away with it, and then come back and tell you what they thought. You can't sit behind them on the couch the whole time and watch them try to solve puzzles. It changes how they perceive the puzzle. People think a puzzle's too hard when someone's watching them. They don't want to look stupid."

"People think a puzzle's too hard when someone's watching them. They don't want to look stupid"



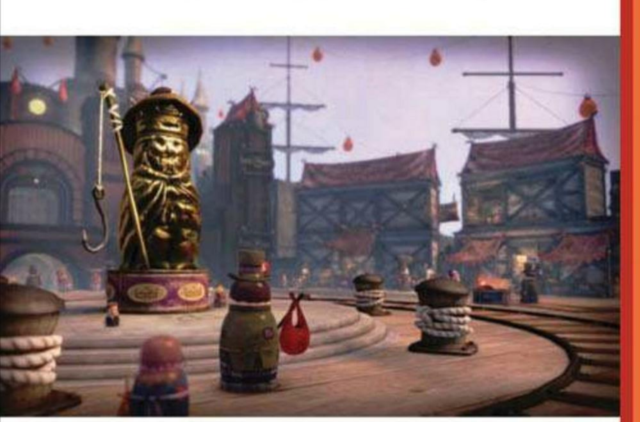
■ While Double Fine's games have so far not been huge commercial hits, the charm and humour of titles like *Costume Quest* has ensured a loyal following.

Which raises the question of difficulty. Some fans fondly recall the hours they spent stuck in the classic adventures, followed by the satisfaction of finally figuring out how to proceed. Others cite such frustration as the reason the genre fell into obscurity in the first place. Schafer's take? "I feel like if you make a game that people get stuck on a lot, and they have to look for hints a lot, that you kind of failed," he says. "There's a way to make people feel entertained when they're stuck that makes them not want to look up a hint, because they feel like they're right there, and you're keeping them right on the edge – okay, you're stuck, but you're looking at the solution... it's *right there*. That can be fine if done correctly. I'd always try to make it so that, if you're stuck, whenever you talked to a character you got something that said, 'You should go over there. Go in that direction,' and tried to make them context-sensitive, so you know what puzzle you should be working on. So you're not just staring at the screen. As long as you're still playing it, and walking around, talking to people, clicking on objects and everything gives you just the little nudge in the right direction – if you do all that, it's like a built-in, automatic difficulty system."

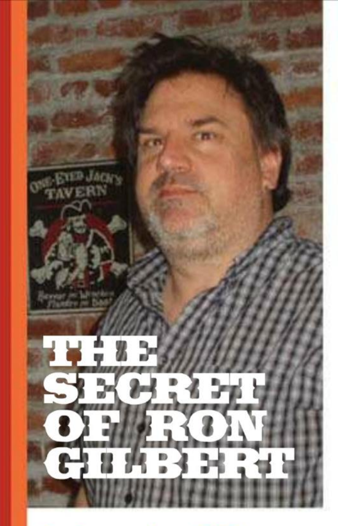
Then again, he recognises that today's players might not have the patience or the luxury of free time that they did as kids in the Nineties. "When I'm playing *Machinarium* on the airplane, and I'm not on the internet, I do feel comforted by the fact that it has a hint system. I'm not going to get stuck on this flight and not be able to finish. I'd hate for my momentum to totally grind to a halt, because I've only got an hour and a half to play this game."

More fundamentally, Schafer thinks that different players are looking for different things in an adventure game – and one game won't please them all. "If you look at a game like *Sword & Sworcery*, it has some elements of adventure gaming, but a lot of the old puzzles where you have to manipulate objects and put them together, that's gone. It's more of a flowing experience, that game. You could say that they made it 'easier', but I think they were going for a different experience. A lot of games have tried that, like the type of game where you're just walking around and exploring. That's my favourite part of adventure games, just exploring," he says. "And then there's this other way that games are going, like *Super Meat Boy* or *VVVVVV* – games that are really hard because players of a certain age miss their old 8-bit punishing platformers, so there are more games coming out that create that kind of tension. And there's a pleasure in taking something that's really hard and frustrating and doing it. Feeling your brain evolving, almost."

As for where on this spectrum the *Double Fine Adventure* will land: "A lot of my work in games has been on ambience. Like with *Grim Fandango* – it's about the feeling of the place you're in, and the narrative. The narrative of the environment. They definitely had really hard, sometimes nonsensical puzzles, and this is where I'm torn. The question is how much to stray away from the old games, or should we at all?" Though trying to predict what players want is nothing new, this game's crowd-funded origins put Double Fine in a unique position as far as catering to the audience goes: "The people who paid for the Kickstarter paid for it not because they want something completely new, but because they wanted something they'd seen. Not something they'd seen before, but you know what I mean?" he struggles to explain. "Like, is it wrong to change adventure games a lot for this game, because [a traditional adventure] is what we promised them? Because we also promised them the *next*. Every game is so different, from *Monkey Island*, to *Day Of The Tentacle*, to *Full Throttle*, and *Sam & Max*, and *Grim Fandango* – they were really different, and we really tried to make a quantum leap in the experience each time. So I do want to make the next game we would have made, basically, after *Grim*. I don't think I'd want to do something that's so changed that people couldn't recognise it."



■ *Stacking* cleverly combines classic adventure gaming conventions with puzzles inspired by the 'nesting' properties of Russian matryoshka dolls. The game was designed by Double Fine art director Lee Petty, with Schafer's help.



THE SECRET OF RON GILBERT

In September 2010, Schafer's former LucasArts mentor Ron Gilbert went to work at Double Fine on a project that's been hush-hush ever since. Though he did make a cameo in the Kickstarter video and will play some role in shaping the *Double Fine Adventure*, his unannounced game has the bulk of his attention. games™ tried to get Schafer to dish.

So... what's Ron working on?
It's not announced. Ron is working on something secret.

Something different from the *Double Fine Adventure*?
Yeah, it's not... you should probably... well... I shouldn't say anything. It has adventury parts to it.

That's already been said on the internet. Or maybe people have speculated that, since he's Ron Gilbert.
Yeah. He's not making a first-person shooter. It's got adventure elements to it.

When do you expect there to be more information?
It won't be long. This season, or so.

Is it something he had in his head for a long time?
It's something he's had in his head, in a way, for a very, very, very long time.

Will adventure game fans be excited?
Yes, I think they will.

■ Ron Gilbert's new game is yet to be announced, but this concept art was shown on his blog as a clue.

The next adventure game he would have made, after *Grim Fandango* – this will be music to his fans' ears. But hold on a minute. Adventure games died after *Grim Fandango* came out, didn't they? Surely Tim Schafer's heard that rumour by now? "That message – I'm so frustrated with it, because we face that a lot," Schafer says. "Like with the perception of *Psychonauts*, people talk about what a flop *Psychonauts* was, or *Grim Fandango*. You know, *Grim Fandango* met its sales numbers, its forecasts. And *Psychonauts* made money for us. So I always wonder why people latch onto the failure aspect of the story, almost as if they want it to be true because of the underdog side of it. I think we need to change that – to specifically change that for adventure games. Even if *Grim* didn't sell as much as *StarCraft*, which also came out that year, that doesn't have to mean that it's a sad story. This really wasn't a story of failure; it was a story of success. You just have to set your expectations right."

He points out that, thanks to Kickstarter, the *Double Fine Adventure* is already a success: "You don't have to sit there and worry, 'Is anyone going to buy this game?' The people who wanted the game paid in advance for it, they'll still get it."

Even so, he thinks an industry-wide shift in the way such niche games are perceived is in order: "We have to stop thinking about it in terms of, 'Is it selling as much as *Call Of Duty*?' The internet has allowed us to organise fan bases around things that people call niche markets. Just because the majority of the market doesn't want something doesn't mean you can't gather those people together so they can all hear about the effort going on. The Kickstarter thing, because it became news, it reached all those people who were hiding and secretly



■ Schafer says he most enjoys adventure games for the chance to explore a new world: "The reward for solving a puzzle, it always felt like, was another room of art."



“This really wasn’t a story of failure; it was a story of success. You just have to set your expectations right”

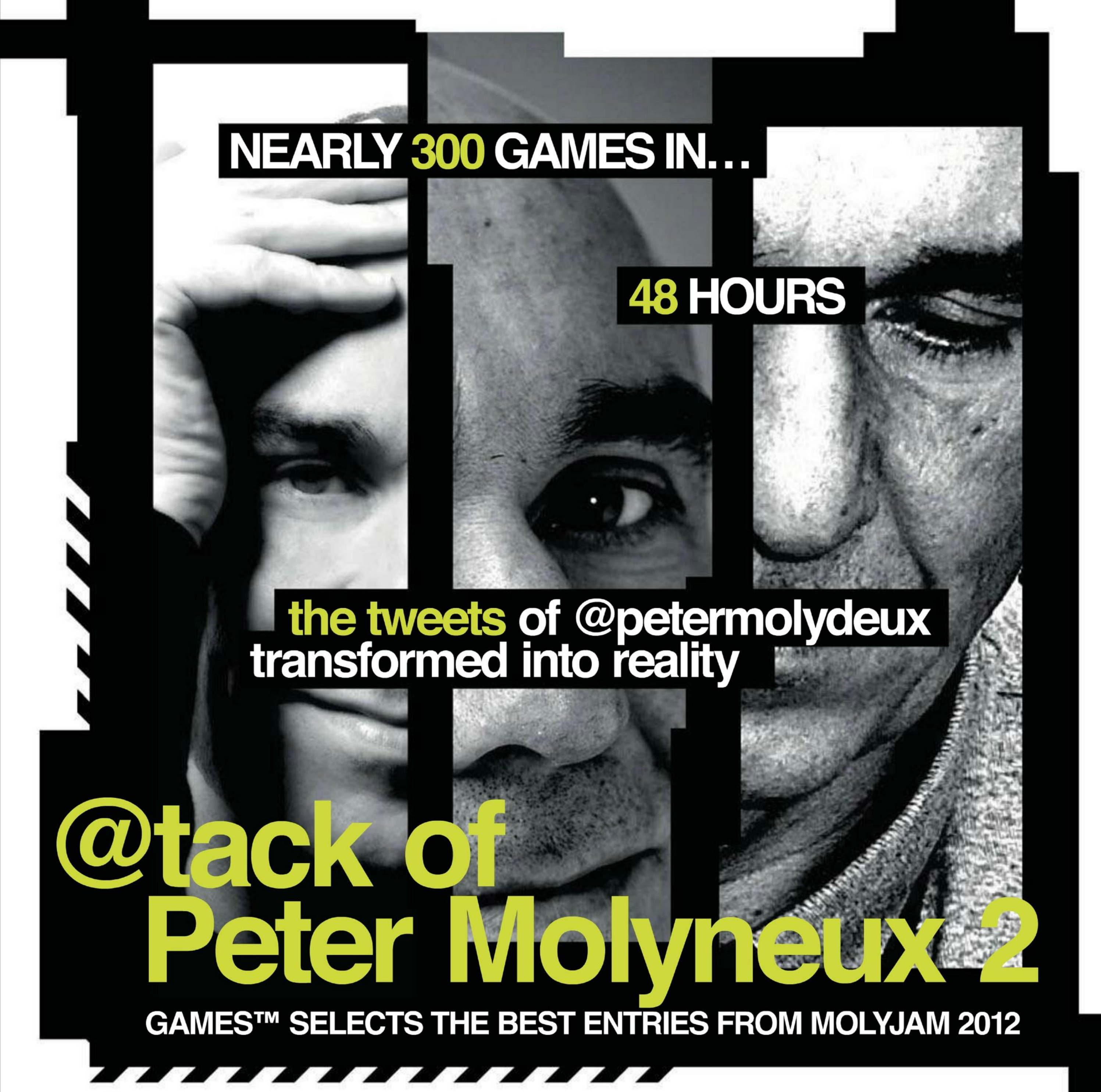
wanted this game, brought them together and allowed them to make it. That’s the expectation we have to set for adventure games – that they are serving the people who want them. Those people are getting what they want. Everybody wins. Everybody’s happy.”

But what about the glory days? Back when he was designing games for LucasArts, adventure games were on top. Couldn’t they be again? Or do we live in a world where an adventure can never sell as much as *Call Of Duty*? “They were selling 200,000 units, or something like that,” Schafer says of the point-and-click classics. “We were so excited because *Full Throttle* sold like a million – that was a big standout for those games. *Monkey Island* didn’t sell that much. It’s hard to imagine a point-and-click adventure game selling as much as a *Call Of Duty*.”

And, Schafer maintains, that’s perfectly okay. He recalls a TV documentary he once watched about one of his favourite bands, the Ramones: “The whole time, with each story of each album, they were pulling their hair out because they thought this album would be their big breakout hit. It was mind-boggling to me because I always loved them and I was always happy with each album. It never occurred to me that someone would think of their albums as big failures. Throughout the documentary, after each album comes out, they talk about it like, ‘Okay, how did we screw that up?’ They’re mad, they’re fighting with each other. It was so frustrating, because I was like, ‘Couldn’t you guys just relax and be the Ramones?’ Like, you’re doing everything, it’s great, just be happy with the fact that you get to be the awesome Ramones!”

This is how Schafer feels about his own games – even the so-called flops. “I was always so happy that I got to make them, so happy that they got to get made. I like the fact that the world has these games in it,” he says, with passion. “Our business would be a lot different if those games were the highest-selling games out there, but I really look at it more in terms of the triumph of being able to create things, and make a living. We want each game to reach as many people as possible, but we’re not going to focus on the people who are not buying it.”

Luckily, this time around, they don’t have to. Since the *Double Fine Adventure* is entirely funded by donations, and backers have already pre-ordered their copies, the game will break even no matter what happens with its release. But maybe this story doesn’t need to end there. Could this possibly be the dawn of a new era – a rebirth of the classic adventures Schafer loves so much and has not made for so long? He freely admits he can’t predict the outcome, but he’s optimistic. This time next year, then, on Kickstarter? Schafer laughs. “If I came out and said, ‘Hey, guess what, I want to make *another* adventure game,’ would we get another $3 million? I think we’d have to have a more interesting pitch than that.”



@tack of Peter Molyneux 2

GAMES™ SELECTS THE BEST ENTRIES FROM MOLYJAM 2012

Like all the best things, it started as a simple joke. A fake Twitter account parodying the wandering mind of gaming luminary Peter Molyneux sprung up several years back, spewing forth demented brain farts on an almost daily basis. A strong following ensued, but it all came to a head at the end of March when a global 48-hour game jam kicked off – indie developers from around the world took on the unenviable task of turning the 140-character satirical thought bubbles of Molyneux's impostor into games in just two days, and Molyjam was born.

The result? Nearly 300 games and projects of wildly varying quality, all of which can be enjoyed free of charge at www.whatwouldmolydeux.com today. So leave your sanity at the door and witness genius born from absolute madness, as we highlight some of our favourites…



Team Size: 2
Jam Location: Sydney, Australia
Engine: Unity3D

Still Life

"Imagine controlling a tear, similar to flower but instead of fields you navigate a naked body."

AMONG THE more technically impressive projects of the lot, *Still Life* is a playground as opposed to a game in the traditional sense, the tricky-to-control teardrops slowly shrinking as you explore the curves of the giant female mannequin. Hidden orbs alter the surface texture accordingly, though it's the sound that steals the show – effects may be scarce but the music transforms a simple digital toy into a truly captivating experience.

"What if the pause button was a weapon? Until developers think outside the box we're going downhill."

Pause Pirate!

IT MIGHT not be the easiest of concepts to work with but the team here has done a marvellously inventive job. As in badly programmed retro games, pausing the game resets momentum of characters and projectiles – get an enemy to follow you over a gap then freeze and resume the action to drop them into the drink, for instance. Clever, well-designed and well worth a play.



Team Size: 2
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: GameMaker

Team Size: 2
Jam Location: San Francisco, USA
Engine: Other

Crowscare

"You are a scarecrow in a world with just one bird."

AMONG THE most sedate and simplistic of the bunch, *Crowscare* mellows things right out with a one-button system and just one thing to do before the game is over. Other takes on this tweet see you befriend the crow (hell, one ignores it completely in favour of a stealth game with multiple crows, which sort of misses the point), but there's something strangely saddening about shooing the last of the birds and knowing that your entire existence is now irrelevant.



Team Size: 3
Jam Location: Mexico
Engine: Other

Plug And Slay

"What if you lived in a world where all guns are required to be plugged into wall sockets? Now THAT would be a tactical shooter wouldn't it?"

THE PLUG-IN guns tweet was among the more popular in inspiring the teams, with everything from *Gauntlet* clones to budget FPS games based on the novel (if daft) conceit. This simple arena shooter perhaps best distils the concept, a top-down versus shooter with plug sockets in each corner and power-ups galore to lure you into the open. Watch out for bouncing shots, though – it's all too easy to fill yourself with holes if you're too trigger-happy.

You Are The Road

THERE'S NO specified win condition in this compelling on-the-fly track editor, meaning it's up to the player to decide what they're trying to achieve from each session. Will you try to screw over all of the cars with sharp bends and (unfinished) hazards? Or try to have as many of them as possible reach top speed before throwing them off a huge ramp? With crazy potential and depth to match its originality, *You Are The Road* is a real Molyjam highlight.



"Have you ever played a racing game and wanted to play as the road rather than the cars? I know I have..."

Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: Unity3D

You Must Hold On To Your Mother's Hand

"Game where you must hold onto your mother's hand. Let go for more than X seconds and it's game over."

LESS A game and more a trippy experiment in getting under the player's skin, *You Must Hold On* puts you in control of a child (or, more accurately, a child's hand) in a stylised world where the only thing that matters is clinging onto mummy's hand for dear life. The creepy speech samples that play when you do will make you squirm until you can't help but let go, but being buffeted by the faceless crowd and losing sight of your lone parent is even more terrifying. Genuinely affecting stuff.

Unreliably Yours

"I designed a point-and-click adventure many years ago where you had to gain the trust of the pointer so it didn't lie to you."

MOLYJAM GOES meta with this, a point-and-click adventure made in 48 hours about the trials of making a point-and-click adventure in 48 hours. The SCUMM-style presentation makes it instantly accessible and it's surprisingly well written for something that was thrown together in a weekend. It's hard to decipher whether the frequent pops at mainstream gaming are genuine and a bit preachy or just toeing the Molydeux line, though it's perfectly enjoyable either way.

Team Size: 4
Jam Location: Boston, USA
Engine: Other



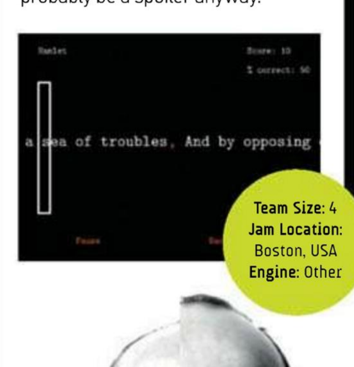
Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Guadalajara, Mexico
Engine: Unity3D



"Game where you control a full stop. Enemies read you stories and you have to jump in between words at the right time."

...! ...?

OR, ALTERNATIVELY, *Grammar Hero*, as its page on whatwouldmolydeux.com calls it, and it isn't hard to see why. Text scrolls from right to left, blinking red punctuation demanding the appropriate keyboard input as the missing full stops, commas, apostrophes and so forth hit the target bar. It's oddly compelling, though we have to confess that we couldn't muster the patience to see whether the selection of classic books on offer were the full versions or just the first chapter or two. But hey, that would probably be a spoiler anyway.



Team Size: 4
Jam Location: Boston, USA
Engine: Other

Don't Deux It!

"You are a pigeon who must go around the city trying to persuade business men not to jump off buildings by retrieving items from their home."

PLAYING AS the brilliantly named Peter Molycoo, it's your job to explore the city in search of potential jumpers. They're all oddly happy to share their woes with a sky rat, with the clues they give you as to what might make them step away from the ledge essential as you raid their houses in search of that one special trinket. Make sure you get the right one though, else their blood could end up on your hands. Wings. Whatever.



Team Size: 4
Jam Location: Melbourne, Australia
Engine: Unity3D

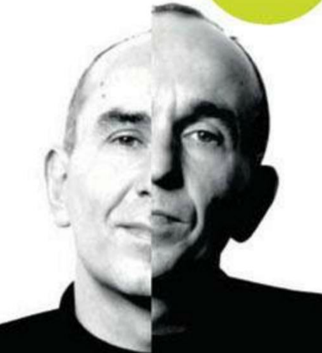


Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: Unity3D

Let's Protest!

"Imagine a game in which you have to join protests to make changes to the rules within the game's world."

IT'S A simplistic interpretation of the original message, sure, but a sound proof of concept for the mechanic in general. It all seems basic enough until you petition for the ability to walk backwards and jump higher, enabling access to new areas and while the idea isn't really explored much further than that, it's a cute and entertaining little ride while it lasts.





"You are a bear but for some reason your oxygen comes from hugging people. Problem is that hugging people breaks their bones."

Team Size: 2
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: None





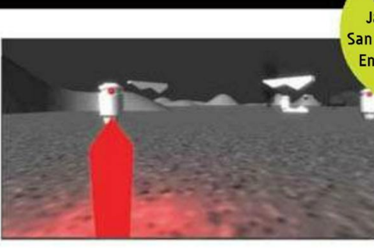




The Bear Of Love

A FLASH game all about balancing the titular bear's air supply against the wellbeing of others. Tighten your grip too much during a hug and you'll lose a bunch of hearts as the victim falls lifeless to the ground, with said hearts used as currency to unlock new outfits and accessories. All set to a jaunty tune that definitely won't drive you insane within minutes, *The Bear Of Love* is something quite special indeed. Maybe play it with the sound off, though.

Team Size: 2
Jam Location: San Francisco, USA
Engine: Unity3D



PH S CT X:The Invisible FPS

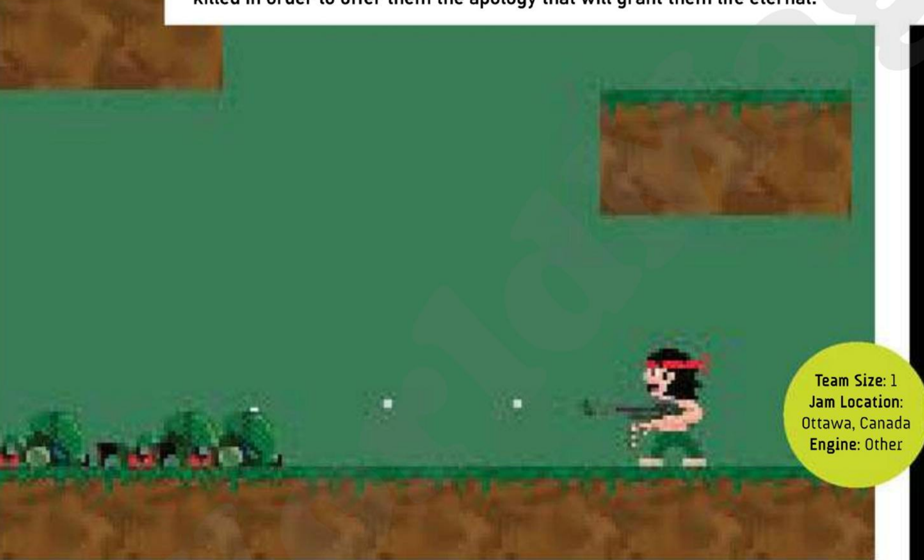
"Would love to make a corridor shooter but where all walls are invisible. Constantly worrying if that enemy has open space to aim at you."

WHILE MANY projects simply used Molydeux's tweets as a jumping off point, this ridiculous shooter took the idea of invisible walls and ran with it. In addition to walls, things like guns, bullets, health and even some enemies are also hidden from view (the game's story explains this brilliantly though, so don't worry), and while it's basically a trial-and-error mess, it's good for a laugh if nothing else.

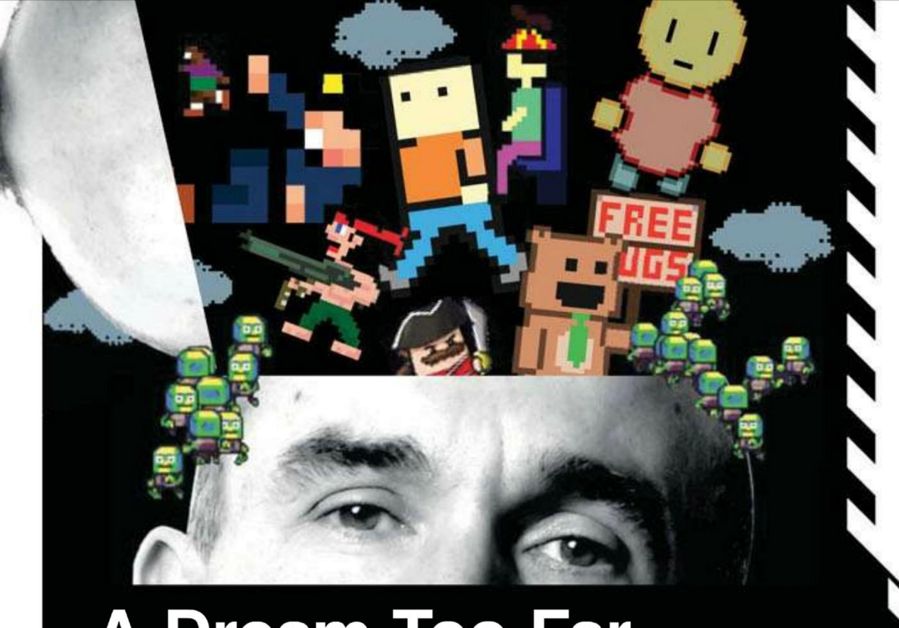
Reluctant Rambo

"I wanted that Rambo licence. My idea was that Rambo is dead, you control his ghost and must locate and hug every one of his victim's ghosts."

EASILY A house favourite, though the chugging metal soundtrack and generic, glitchy retro shooter gameplay hide the game's brilliance to begin with. Lose all your lives, though, and the action flips to fall in line with Molydeux's tweet – Rambo's disembodied spirit must return to the corpses of all those he killed in order to offer them the apology that will grant them life eternal.



Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Ottawa, Canada
Engine: Other



A Dream Too Far

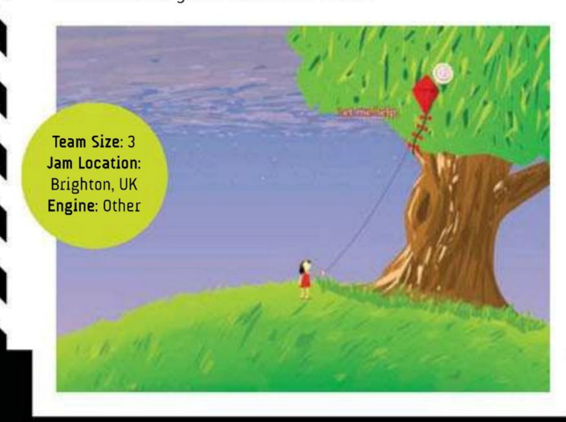
Not every idea is a good one...

Even the brightest minds falter once in a while, and Molyjam saw this proven beyond all doubt – some of Molydeux's musings saw ambitious types bite off more than they could chew while other teams backed completely the wrong horse. Molydeux's amusing suggestion of combining survival-horror and bowling, for instance, spawned a slew of dodgy bowling games that either take place in the dark or shoehorn in severed heads or the odd zombie, hardly in line with the leftfield creativity at the heart of the event. Other teams seemed to ignore the Twitter feed altogether, simply using Molyjam as a vessel for their own bizarre ideas and missing the point entirely. But far more saddening were the efforts that bravely tackled some of Molydeux's more convention-defying tweets and wound up crippled by their own grand ambition. *You Are A Spy & The World Is Transparent* is one such victim, a concept that can obviously never be made to work, and one that just ends up a confusing mess as a result. Kudos for your efforts, guys, but while some of you did the impossible and made art out of daftness, others simply proved that some ideas should never be allowed to leave the brain.

Kite

"You are a small girl flying a talking kite. The kite seems to know about a upcoming major terrorist attack and floats towards clues."

A QUAINT little game with (as the tweet implies) something of a sting in its tail, *Kite* makes up for its simplicity with charm and a well-disguised evil streak. In any case, it's hard not to love anything that features a talking kite, especially one so happy to retrieve lollipops from trees for us. It does beg the question though, who in their right mind puts candy in a tree? Then again, who in their right mind makes a game based on a tweet?



Team Size: 3
Jam Location: Brighton, UK
Engine: Other

In The Aeroplane Over The Mystery

"Game in which you must comfort children on a plane who are afraid of flying, game mechanic is similar to spinning plates."

IT'S TOUGH enough juggling the needs of the four kids on this pixel art flight before you factor in the unnecessarily precise and obscure controls, though successfully managing to keep your head above water is rewarding enough to make the stress worthwhile. It might seem in somewhat poor taste to have a plane full of children crash when they all get too needy, but... well, see for yourself.



Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: None



Team Size: 2
Jam Location: Australia
Engine: Other

Every Night I Dream I'm Better

"*Visualize an open-world game set in a white box. During the night you dream and can place elements from your dream into the blank world.*"

WHILE NOT exactly in line with the brief brief, *Every Night* is a slightly unsettling rally between NES *Zelda*-style action and a clinical white room with the feel of a hospital ward. Each time you go to bed, you're returned to Faux Hyrule for a little more power-levelling and, while some monsters can kill you instantly, it's good to return to that chilling empty room once in a while just to see which parts of the dream world have manifested themselves in reality…

Sealed Fate

TEXT ADVENTURES are among the quickest and easiest games to throw together in a hurry, hence why so many projects turn Molydeux's silliness into text-based games. *Sealed Fate* is among our favourites, careful and almost constant verbal manipulation of the volatile baby crucial to progress through the darkness. Even with such a silly concept, it's no more ridiculous than many of the text adventures of old, either.



"*Imagine carrying a radioactive baby in a pitch black environment, your baby would act as a torch. Rocking the baby intensifies the glow, et cetera.*"

Game Debug Help
Caves
You stand in a pitch black area. You can't see a thing.
A crying sound is nearby. It is sorrowful, yet inviting.

> pick up baby
You carefully pick up the baby. It is soft and warm. It likes you!

> shake baby
[An internal error occurred]
The baby giggles happily and a bright glow emanates from its body, illuminating the world around you.

> rock baby
[An internal error occurred]
The baby squirms uncomfortably, glowing even brighter. It doesn't like how much it's been shaken about!

> shake baby
[An internal error occurred]
No, no, no! You shook the baby too hard! I'm afraid this is the end for you. There's no saving yourself now.

Team Size: 1
Jam Location: Undisclosed
Engine: Other

Team Size: 4
Jam Location: San Francisco, USA
Engine: XNA

door speed: a lot much

"Demon" Door

"*Doors and windows, however, they interest me. I mean, what if, just imagine for a moment that you could actually take CONTROL of a door.*"

STRICTLY SPEAKING, you don't directly control a door here – you control a devil perched on a rooftop opposite a revolving door, wailing on your Space Bar to make him smack a remote control and spin the door. Stray pedestrians are launched away based on door speed and desired angle, the object being to put victims through all the windows on the building opposite in a quirky cross between *Angry Birds* and *Rampage*.

Dulcis Ex Machina

"*Could playing as a vending machine be fun? That is my question to you young designers out there today.*"

THE SIMPLE answer to that tweet, if Dulcis is anything to go by, is a resounding 'no'. Still, it's an entertaining little diversion, even if it's one that we still don't entirely understand. A room full of consumers mills around and as the snack machine, you have three options – a 'food' button which seems to make people hungry, a 'noise' button meant to entice them into further purchases and, as is standard on all vending machines, a death ray to put bloated, dying overconsumers out of their misery.



Team Size: 2
Jam Location: Canada
Engine: Unity3D

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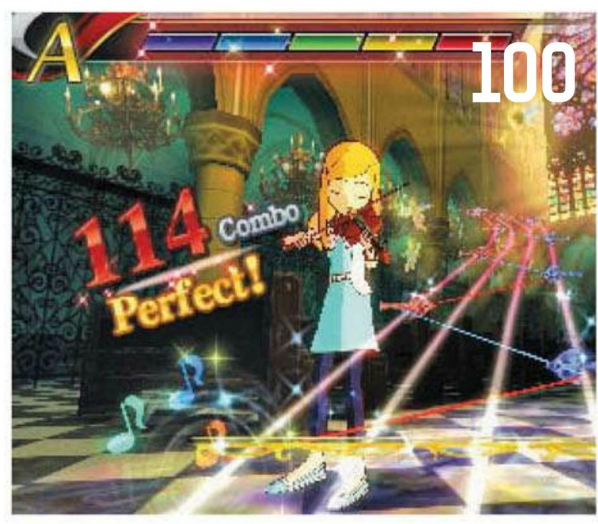
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gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk

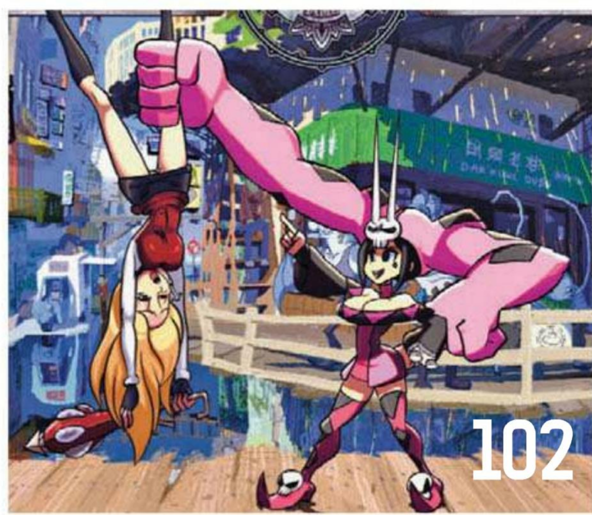


Reviews

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.















ONLINE REVIEWS

With online elements making up a greater portion of some gaming packages, a slight tweak in the way games are reviewed has come about. More online multiplayer modes are made available to us at review stage, so it's only fair that these are taken into consideration where appropriate, and not ignored. After all, if the company in question deems them important enough to present at review stage, then we feel it unfair to purposely overlook them. This will also provide a fairer representation to you. In this way, we can help identify, and not punish, titles with an online focus and only negligible solo play. In cases where valuable online components aren't available for review, we'll mark the Online Reviewed box with 'No' and will, if necessary, revisit the title once time has been spent with it online, so nobody misses out. When online elements are non-existent or inconsequential you'll find 'N/A' in the space.

CAPCOM CELEBRATES THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON IN STYLE

Dragon's Dogma

When a publisher lifts the curtain on a title it has been stealthily hiding under lock and key, what's the first thing you do as a gamer? If you're anything like us, you'll scrutinise the early fragments while trying to imagine how said game will play if it makes it to release day without falling off the radar. For the likes of *FIFA* and *Call Of Duty*, this is a relatively straightforward process – as aside from a few tweaks and revisions, the formula usually remains the same – but when Capcom handed us an image of a flaming griffin just over a year ago, our minds boggled.

The most obvious comparison was the titanic *Monster Hunter*, as by swapping the draconic charms of Rathlos and Lagiacrus for something more cemented in Greek mythology, it seemed like Capcom was rebranding the serpentine safari for a Western audience. This assumption, however, turned out to be way off the mark, as although *Dragon's Dogma* lets you sever the tail of a mythical beast before foraging for herbs in the wilderness, its composition is substantially different to your typical Deviljho capture quest. That's not to say it's any less exhilarating when the going gets enraged, but this hunt is more Dragonborn than dragon tamer.

It's a tapestry thick with the discernible threads of inspiration, but if there's one game that *Dragon's Dogma* is more reminiscent of than any other, it's *Skyrim*. Both games are set in a sprawling land with a sweeping map, both games feature an apocalyptic dragon as the main antagonist, and both games – despite coming from opposite corners of the globe – blend the action-RPG mantra within an open-world setting for epic effect. It's a Western genre done justice by a Japanese studio in a way that echoes Platinum's *Vanquish* as a response to *Gears Of War*, by stripping back the multiplayer and focusing on the solo sorties, Capcom has crafted its finest RPG to date.

Of course, that's not saying much when the studio's previous attempts include the *Breath Of Fire* series, a *Mega Man X* spin-off and not a whole lot else, but to go from mediocrity to an internally developed world which rivals those of its closet contemporaries is a considerable achievement – even more so when you consider the depth and breadth of the landscape. The story centres on an ancient dragon that arises from its slumber and immediately makes a beeline for the nearest fishing village, where our hero (or heroine) is going about their day-to-day in blissful ignorance of the impending fire-starter's visit.

What follows is a daring counterattack as the player grabs a sword and tries to send the oversized lizard on its less than merry way, but instead of lopping off a scale or two, you only manage to incur the beast's wrath before having your heart torn from your chest. The dragon then chants a menacing verse in its native tongue, consumes your still-beating heart whole and watches your wounds heal with Wolverine-like speed before flying away. Then when you finally wake with no pulse and a savage scar for your troubles, the only logical solution is to follow in the footsteps of Saint George, Beowulf and Bilbo by going on a dragon quest.

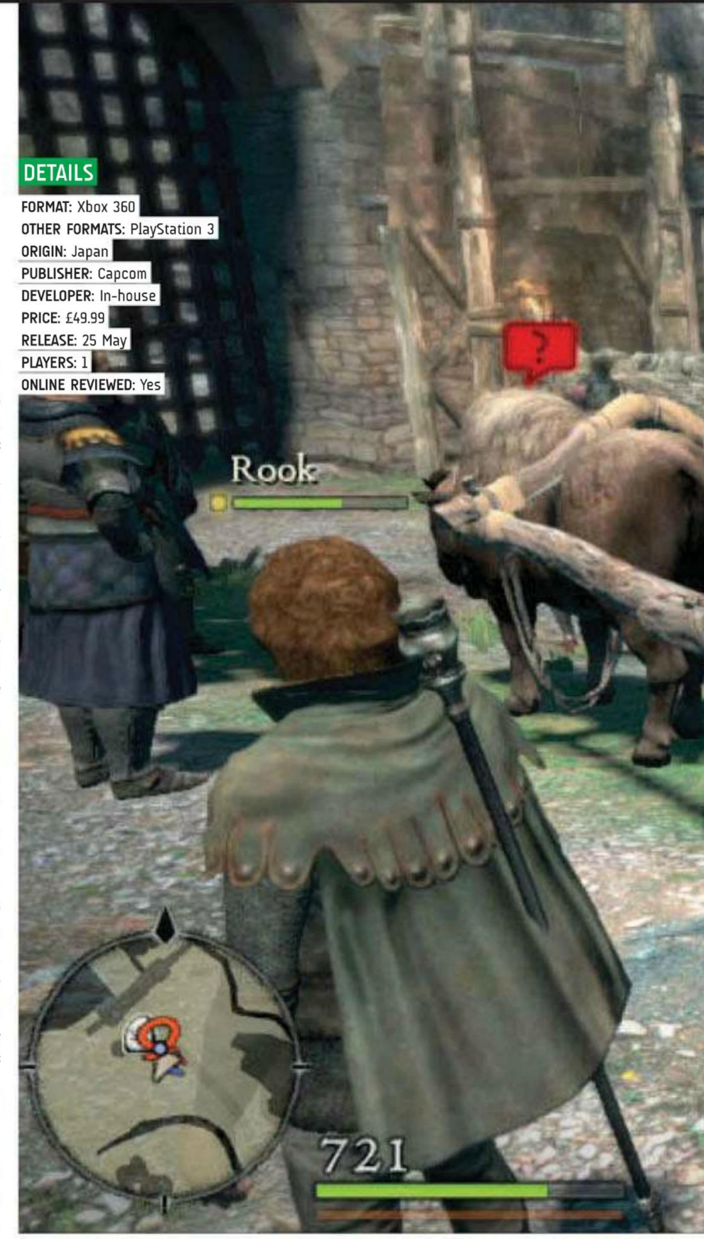
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TRAWL TALE: The central plot is a tad simplistic by modern RPG standards and won't hold your attention for very long. Fortunately, the epic quests and weighted combat are far more engaging.

If there's one thing that videogames have taught us over the years it's that dragons aren't the easiest of creatures to tackle singlehandedly. So, to give the heartless fisherman some much-needed support, Capcom has populated its fantasy world with an ethereal race of humanoid 'Pawns' who are eager to help. This ties in with the hero's newfound status as a cursed Arisen – which means you can travel to a spiritual plane called the Everfall and enlist the help of up to three randomly-generated warriors from the Pawn Legion. They lack the scripted depth of more traditional RPG companions, but they're refreshingly flexible in terms of party creation.

Your first Pawn is the most important as, unlike the other two, they share in your experience points and cannot be dismissed from your service. You also get to design them from the ground-up before travelling to the far corners of the map, and while the

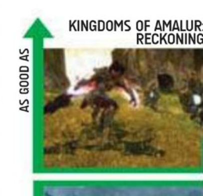


DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 25 May
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Above: Capcom plans to support the game with DLC that will include new quests and a range of additional weapons and armour.

AS GOOD AS: KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: RECKONING



WORSE THAN: THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM





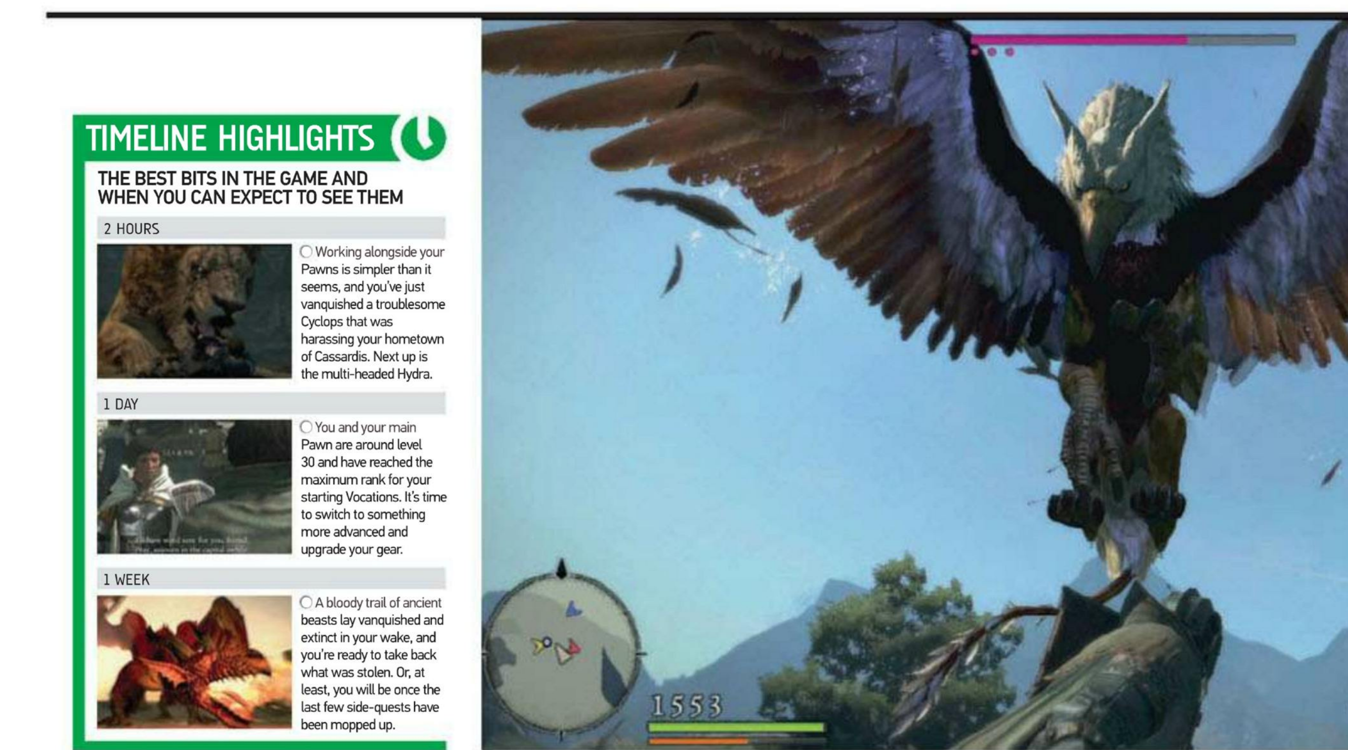
Above: Having your sword and shield coated in ice really isn't much help when you're fighting zombies. It seems our wannabe mage companion has never played a videogame before.

A MASSIVE ACHIEVEMENT, AND FURTHER PROOF THAT THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE SHOULD BE BREACHED MORE OFTEN



INTERNET PAWN

Although *Dragon's Dogma* is primarily a single-player game with no options for local or online co-op functionality, it does feature a passive networking system that lets your main Pawn appear in the worlds of other online players. This is similar in principal to the message writing and phantom invasions in From Software's *Dark Souls*, as although the game can be enjoyed without the need for a broadband connection, it undeniably adds to the experience when you hire a player-created Pawn. Then when their static level becomes too low to be of any use, you can send them back to their maker with a gift of your choosing to pass on. You can even score them out of five based on Appearance Rating, Battle Rating and Helpfulness.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

2 HOURS

Working alongside your Pawns is simpler than it seems, and you've just vanquished a troublesome Cyclops that was harassing your hometown of Cassardis. Next up is the multi-headed Hydra.

1 DAY

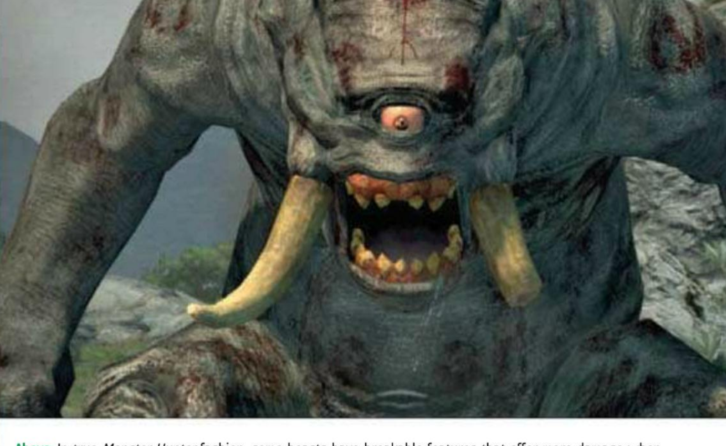
You and your main Pawn are around level 30 and have reached the maximum rank for your starting Vocations. It's time to switch to something more advanced and upgrade your gear.

1 WEEK

A bloody trail of ancient beasts lay vanquished and extinct in your wake, and you're ready to take back what was stolen. Or, at least, you will be once the last few side-quests have been mopped up.

Below: As an open-world RPG from the same company that brought us *Monster Hunter*, it was always a safe bet that *Dragon's Dogma* would have lots of clutter. Grapes can be plucked, loot can be liberated and monsters can be thoroughly frisked.





Above: In true *Monster Hunter* fashion, some beasts have breakable features that offer more damage when targeted in addition to rare materials. This Cyclops has tusks that make a sturdy armour component.

CLASS WARFARE

In *Monster Hunter*, walking the path of a Gunner is a tricky and time-consuming business, but in *Dragon's Dogma* the ranged classes are just as capable as the blade masters. There's no mana system to worry about, so spells like the electrifying Brontide whip and the Comestion firewall only need to be charged – preferably without interruption. Fletching-focused classes like the Ranger and Magick Archer, meanwhile, can either fire an unlimited supply of standard arrows, splash out on a quiver of special arrows or charge up trick shots like the Tenfold Flurry and Deathly Arrow. You can also switch Vocations at will and spend your experience points on class-specific Core Skills and interchangeable Augments like the strength-boosting Vehemence.





FAQs

Q. VOICE OF AN ANGEL?
Although the conversations are all adequately voiced, the hero remains silent from start to finish, save a few sword-swinging grunts.

Q. HOW'S THE SWIMMING?
Lousy. Wade into water you'll be enveloped by a fog-like monster called The Brine. It's an old-school boundary trick.

Q. WHY PAWNS?
It might have something to do with the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act, or Capcom may be fond of chess…

A range of customisation options is less impressive than the equivalent canvases of Bethesda and BioWare, it offers more scope than *Monster Hunter*. Not that choosing from 40 *slightly different* scar patterns matters, mind, as once you pick a Vocation and deck your character out in clothes and armour, their visage will be buried under cloth and plate.

Your chosen Vocation, however, will be apparent from the offset. The three starting classes are Fighter, Strider and Mage, and while that may sound like a familiar toss-up between sword, bow and magic, the real-time combat offers a tangible sense of immediacy that makes each profession feel unique. This is thanks to the primary and secondary weapons that work alongside an upgradeable set of skills. The Fighter class, for instance, wields a one-handed sword that can mix light and heavy attacks with stamina-draining lunges, launches and thrusts, while the offhand shield can function as a makeshift springboard to send an ally skyward.

It's apparent that Hideaki Itsuno – the director of every *Devil May Cry* bar the first – has drawn upon his vast experience to craft a combat system that's instantly accessible and surprisingly deep. As you unlock the advanced Warrior, Ranger and Sorcerer classes, the urge to try a wide range of team combinations with different skills and equipment becomes a hard allure to resist. The game also features three hybrid classes in the Mystic Knight, Assassin and Magick Archer. These mix the fundamentals of the focused classes with unique tricks, including the Mystic Knight's ability to enchant their shield with elemental spells that trigger when struck.

But despite some inventive techniques, the spell occasionally falls apart when you have to rely on your Pawns. For the most part, they can take care of themselves and only need the odd command or resuscitation to keep things on track. But on one occasion when we equipped our hero with a flaming sword to tackle a horde of flammable undead, our supporting mage kept augmenting his blade with a less than helpful ice spell – completely ruining our strategy. Then when it turned out there was no way to change his mind, we had to show him the door before finding a less clumsy replacement.

BY STRIPPING BACK THE MULTIPLAYER AND FOCUSING ON THE SOLO SORTIES, CAPCOM HAS CRAFTED ITS FINEST RPG



It's a small blemish on an otherwise accomplished AI system that casts an illusion of working within a close-knit team – even if at times you'll secretly wish for online co-op. But despite the subtle shortcomings, the Legion offers more than just helping hands. Each Pawn has a knowledge rating that relates to each enemy, quest and area, so by selecting your minions on the merit of their regional smarts as well as raw ability, you can learn tips on which NPCs to consult and how to tackle certain beasts. They also vocalise musings like, "It's not the last time we'll call upon this inn, I'll warrant," at every available opportunity.

As quizzically bemusing as the Pawns are, though, the real star is the land of Gransys itself. It's not nearly as expansive as Skyrim, or as densely packed with distractions, but its vibrant mix of open plains, windswept canyons, frozen peaks and coastal coliseums do a good job of constructing the fantasy aesthetic. The open wilderness also plays host to its fair share of dungeons, caves and outposts, while the main city of Gran Soren provides a central base to enhance your armour and weaponry with various materials. You'll also need to offload your plunder frequently to remain unencumbered, but without the ability to fast-travel, this can become a chore.

Thankfully, the engaging quests make up for all the backtracking, with everything from wyvern hunts and ambush-laden escort missions to searching for lost treasure in subterranean temples and a four-day investigation that has you collecting evidence on an accused merchant. And while the main story focuses on the relationship between the Arisen and the dragon, as well as a shadowy cult of dragon worshippers and a star-crossed love affair with the Duke's wife, the game is further festooned with notice boards and NPCs that keep dishing out the side-quests. You'll never be short of something to do.

Or indeed, something to slay, as with the absence of pitfall traps and tranquilliser bombs, *Dragon's Dogma* is all about the coup-de-grâce. The cannon fodder includes everything from easily dispatched direwolves and marauding bandits to snow harpies that swoop from the sky and semitransparent lizards that become more vulnerable once you chop off their tails. They all offer a steady challenge when encountered in packs, and by identifying the most dangerous threats early and diligently protecting your mages, you'll be visited by death considerably less often than in *Dark Souls*' merciless land of Lordran.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HOME SCHOOLED: Sitting in the Knowledge Chair lets you tutor your Pawn in basic combat strategies.
DARK STALKERS: When day turns to night, the roads will play host to more fearsome creatures.

And yet, all the aforementioned components are stepping stones that pave the way for the epic showdowns with the mythical beasts. There's an air of *Monster Hunter* in how you circle behind the Cyclops to avoid its cumbersome club, back off when it goes berserk and then swarm in like an army ant when it trips up and tumbles to the ground. It'll even drop some unique materials after closing its singular eye for good. But unlike the huntsmen of the Hunters Guild, the Arisen goes for a more hands-on approach that has you fumbling for footholds while searching for the sweet spot.

It's a system that's clearly inspired by *Shadow Of The Colossus*. It offers a chance to quickly whittle down each behemoth's massive health bar – at the risk of them grabbing, flattening or flinging you skyward for severe damage – and adds a welcome dynamic to each prolonged hunt. The beasts also look fantastic, with the MT Framework engine pumping out some impressive animations that bring the damsel-kidnapping Ogre, the laser-firing Golem and the skittish Griffin to life before you move like Jason and fashion their still-warm bones into a fancy new fleece that protects against chimera venom. Just don't tell the WWF.

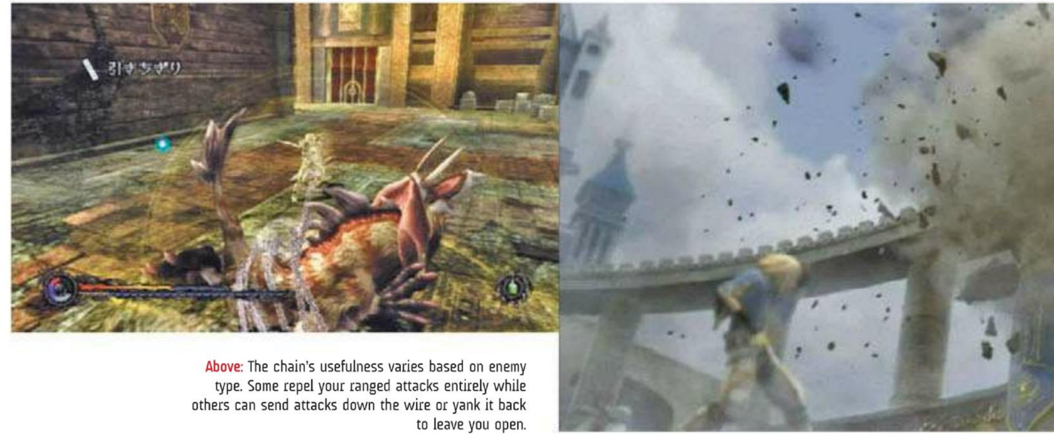
And it's these moments, when having spent hours questing for the best gear, searching for the most agreeable Pawns and then pitting your team against a creature that ranks higher than humanity on the food chain – only to emerge victorious – is where *Dragon's Dogma* burns the brightest. Its world isn't as evocatively rich as Skyrim, its action-orientated combat doesn't have the killer appeal of *Dark Souls*, and its single-player focus is completely at odds with the co-op-centric *Monster Hunter*. However, as Capcom's first foray into the open-world RPG this is a worthy achievement, and further proof that the East-West divide should be breached more often. And not just by dragons.



POOR ELENA IS CURSED, AN OMINOUS CLOCK IN THE BOTTOM-LEFT CORNER OF THE SCREEN SLOWLY TICKING HER LIFE AWAY AS YOU EXPLORE

CRAFT FAIR

With random loot drops and farming points in each of the towers, *Pandora's Tower*'s crafting system feels strikingly similar to *Monster Hunter*'s progression mechanic. New gear and components can be built from scratch if you can source the right materials, plus weapons found in the towers can be upgraded in a similar manner, though it's a little more confusing before you get stuck in – numbered upgrades seem like different options entirely, but in fact each can be applied (and they all stack) as you come across the right goodies. The same freakish merchant will also buy any demon flesh Elena is too full to eat and recovered literature for a decent price, plus there are rewards for turning in certain amounts to make constant returns to the hub even more beneficial.



Above: The chain's usefulness varies based on enemy type. Some repel your ranged attacks entirely while others can send attacks down the wire or yank it back to leave you open.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Ganbarion
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

NO, WE'RE PRETTY SURE IT WAS A BOX

Pandora's Tower

Seeing so many developers flounder around new technology like Kinect and PlayStation Move recently takes us back to the early days of the Wii and DS. Trepidation and missteps are always rife in the infancy of any new hardware, though this last wave of Wii games reminds us to be patient – since the Nintendo console launched, Wii titles have evolved from minigame collections and skill-free waggle frenzies to games that, at their finest, employ a combination of traditional and unconventional control features to create experiences no other platform could offer. As much as it might be an assurance of hope for this latest wave of hardware, though, *Pandora's Tower* serves as an equally poignant reminder of something far more important. In a curiously twisted games market where all anybody seems to want to do is dance with C-3PO and shout and wave their way through menus, it takes a game of such mechanical prowess and dark themes to remind us that motion control and maturity need not be mutually exclusive concepts.

The setup is about as standard as they come – androgynous hero must save helpless female by facing an increasingly arduous series of trials – but the way in which it all plays out is anything but. Ridiculously dressed hero Aeron's Herculean task takes him to and from the titular tower (which is actually a bunch of smaller, themed towers strapped together) as the game flits schizophrenically between a more than competent *Metroidvania*-cum-*Zelda* adventure and a twisted dating game where the love interest grows tentacles if you leave her alone for too long. You see, poor Elena is cursed, an ominous clock in the bottom-left corner of the screen slowly ticking her life away as you explore. While the flesh of the tower's Masters (read: bosses) will eventually cure her entirely of this hideous affliction, you'll often find you need to rush back with some less potent gruesome meat lumps for her in order to buy some time. It's bad enough having to watch her tuck into the vile dinners every time you serve one up but, in a particularly cruel twist, Elena is vegetarian.

Despite the pitiful voice acting, this growing bond between mysterious hero and tortured girl is genuinely one of *Pandora's Tower*'s strongest features. You can chat to her as you please and ply her with gifts when all is well but it only takes one delayed return – to find Elena sprouting purple tentacles and clearly in agony because of your own poor timekeeping – to fire up the guilt factory, and it isn't long before taking care of her is as much of a priority as everything that goes on in the tower itself. Each sub-tower is littered with shortcuts and escape routes, though as they grow more complex it can be a nightmare trying to find your way back to the suffering girl as the crushing ticks of the death clock grow ever louder.

It's inventive and compelling in this respect, then, but the action sections – which are still the main meat of the game – show similar creativity. As well as a sword (and later a wider variety of melee weapons), Aeron is armed with a multipurpose chain as useful in combat as it is in navigating the confusing towers. Enemies can be lashed, grabbed, dragged, thrown, bound and even tied together with it as the situation or enemy type dictates, the latter being a particularly handy crowd control tool as linked enemies are both damaged by any attacks dealt to just one of them. Outside of encounters, the chain serves as both a grappling hook (for swinging and climbing about the place) and a *Zelda*-style hookshot capable of retrieving items and activating switches. It even has a tension gauge, governing durability when used in binding enemies and attack power when laying into them more directly, the risk/reward mechanic of knowing when to shoot for a full charge and when to release before an enemy zaps the chain or reels you in an absolute joy when you learn to call it well.

It's fair to say that, without the chain, *Pandora's Tower* would be nothing at all. Basic combat is a one-button affair, tapped combos and charged attacks (with timed follow-ups as weapons are levelled up) the extent of its complexity. But with button-based simplicity coupled with the Wii Remote-fuelled chain, the resulting system is something far greater than the sum of its parts, and as good a use of the Remote/Nunchuk combo as the Wii has seen. There's Classic Controller support as well if you'd rather go down the traditional route, but unlike almost every other game that offers this option the standard setup is actually the best way to enjoy the game.

Between well-designed dungeons, thrilling boss battles and a compelling hook in Elena's deteriorating condition, *Pandora's Tower* is a unique treat for those still loyal to the Wii. The odd nose will probably be turned up at the repetitive nature of Aeron's task, a couple more by the dating game influence, and likely more still by the fixed camera angles that seem to be working against you much of the time. But for those that find their noses remain level, Ganbarion's ambitious debut is a game that really begs, and deserves, to be loved.

Pandora's Tower really feels like a *Castlevania* game, only one with heart and soul like the Konami franchise has rarely enjoyed. It's an odd fusion of action elements, RPG progression and relationship nurturing, and, while on paper that seems like it should end pretty terribly, the truth is that there are few better fits for the gap left after *Skyward Sword*'s completion.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CHAIN CHOMP: Aeron's chain offers both ingenious combat functionality and platforming freedom, as well as being used in a few instances of minor puzzle-solving.



Above: Enemy attacks can break items in your inventory, and getting them repaired is expensive. The equipment system is similar to *Resident Evil 4*'s attaché case inventory, meaning that smaller protective items need to be juggled as required rather than stacked.



Above: Puzzles are seldom complicated, though they often incorporate platforming elements and obnoxious time limits to make them more taxing.

Left: Upgrading weapons leads to powerful new combos from the charge attack, provided your timing is good enough to pull them off.

BETTER THAN

RYGAR



WORSE THAN

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

FAQs

Q. IS IT AN ACTION ADVENTURE OR RPG?

It's a healthy mix of both, with neither flavour overpowering the other.

Q. HOW SO?

Combat is simple and intense, but the levelling system and a lot of the inventory management stuff is straight out of RPG Town.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

You're probably looking at around 15 hours or so for one playthrough.



HAS ALL THE RIGHT NOTES, JUST NOT NECESSARILY IN THE RIGHT ORDER

Rhythm Thief & The Emperor's Treasure

Right: Navigating the world of *Rhythm Thief* is done via a stage-by-stage map screen that occasionally has multiple routes but is otherwise simple.

Below: The minigames use different inputs including buttons, touch screen and tilt. The latter is used without the 3D display.

In the wake of *Guitar Hero*'s apparent demise, rhythm-action has found itself at a crossroads of sorts. Should the youngest videogame genre continue along the path carved by Harmonix in an appeal to the pop-loving masses or should it return to its roots, using abstract gameplay and original songs, like genre godfather *PaRappa The Rapper*? The brightest developers realise, of course, that there's actually a third option – to take the rhythm-action game and fuse it to another genre. *Theatrythm Final Fantasy* blends the form with JRPG conventions for rather brilliant results while *Rhythm Thief And The Emperor's Treasure* – the latest game from *Samba De Amigo* creator Shun Nakamura – drops its rhythmic minigames into a structure almost identical to that of the *Professor Layton* series. Sadly, however, Sega's genre mash-up doesn't quite hit the right notes.

Taken in isolation, *Rhythm Thief*'s minigames are at least pretty decent. Each challenge takes a critical scene from the plot, featuring a music-obsessed Parisian child-thief named Phantom R, and adds some rhythm to his actions. There's no overriding style to the gameplay. Instead, each scene has its own system, whether it be based on button presses, touch screen taps and swooshes, or even a tilt of the 3DS itself. Like Nintendo's exemplary *Rhythm Heaven*, this approach gives each minigame its own identity and naturally makes some challenges more memorable than others. Gently sweeping the stylus from side to side in a violin-based challenge, for example, is a moment of true innovation for the genre. The emotion required to feel out the music and get those bow strokes just right takes a lot of practice but is ultimately rewarding, and few other games have come this close to nurturing a sense of musicality in the player. Mimic-based dancing games, on the other hand are, as the bread and butter of the rhythm minigame genre; far less innovative, but there's no denying their ability to get you playing almost entirely by ear, feeling the beat and playing 'in the zone', as it were.



DETAILS
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Sega
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

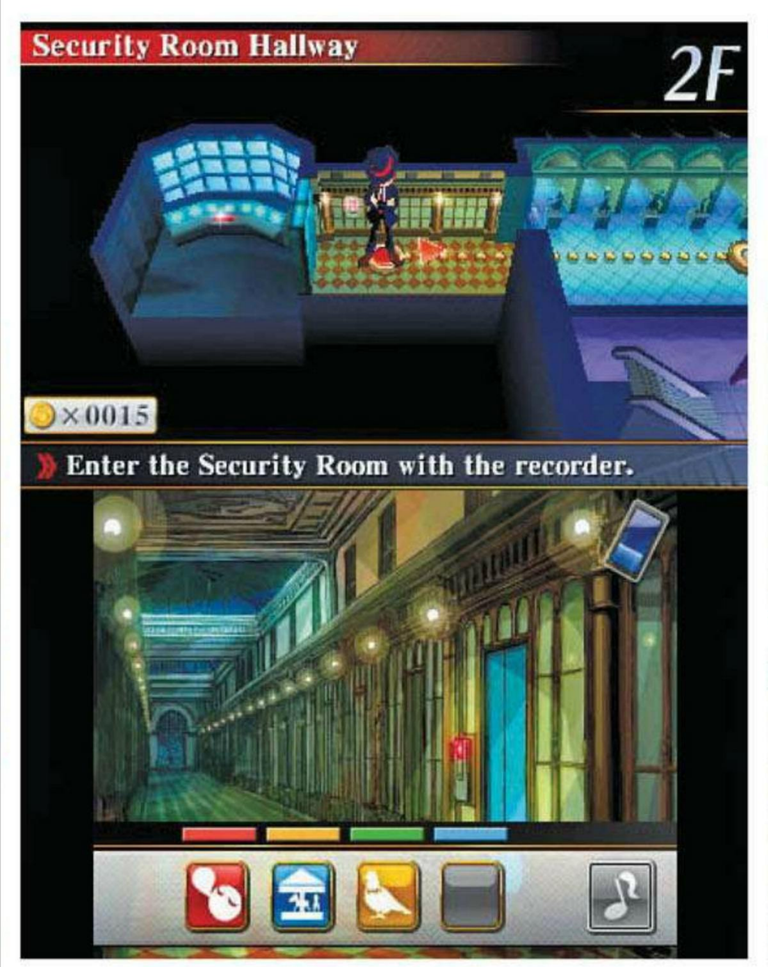
Curiously, *Rhythm Thief* very nearly torpedoes its best qualities with a horribly unhelpful guide function that's switched on by default. Leave the guide on and the game will use *Ouendan*-style concentric circles to help struggling players get their timing right, but it actually does more harm than good. The best way to beat these minigames, as in any decent rhythm-action title, is to get into the groove and react to the sound effects and music; *Rhythm Thief*'s visual cues distract from this fundamental, promoting an incorrect way of playing which produces poorer results on the whole. Consider yourself warned: turn off the guide.

FEW OTHER GAMES HAVE COME THIS CLOSE TO NURTURING A SENSE OF MUSICALITY IN THE PLAYER

Rhythm Thief's minigames don't exist in isolation, of course, and that's the game's biggest problem. Just getting to play a tune can be a bit of a slog as you work through the *Layton*-esque narrative structured around the minigames. There's nothing necessarily wrong with the quality of these sections. The stereoscopic animation is of a very high standard for a handheld title, with generally excellent voice acting, and makes comfortable viewing for anyone who's enjoyed the likes of Belleville Rendezvous or Lupin III. Likewise, the point-and-click adventure sections are nicely drawn, feature pithy, well-written dialogue, and are packed with lots of distractions such as collectibles or audio-based puzzles. They'd be right at home in a Level-5 produced adventure game about a gentleman sleuth and his unlikely cockney ward. The problem is they just don't fit that well with a rhythm-action game.


BETTER THAN: PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE SPECTRE'S CALL
WORSE THAN: ELITE BEAT AGENTS

One of the strengths of the rhythm-action genre is its arcade-like immediacy. Even *PaRappa*, with its focus on lengthy cut-scenes, put its musical sections at the forefront and allowed players to access them as urgently as they liked. *Guitar Hero 5* even allowed players to jump into a song at any point as it played on the title screen. Why? Because rhythm-action games are, first and foremost, for people who love to play with music. It's obvious really, which only makes *Rhythm Thief*'s insistence



REPRISE

It's easy to forget, but Sega actually has quite a rich heritage of rhythm-action titles, from *Space Channel 5* to *Samba De Amigo* and, more recently, *Hatsune Miku Project Diva*. *Rhythm Thief* pays homage to the former two of those titles with the full gameplay systems of both recreated in minigame form. The *Samba De Amigo* homage even asks you to tilt the 3DS to recreate maraca poses. The references are a nice little treat for Sega fans but they also serve to remind us that the developer is capable of much, much better music games than *Rhythm Thief*. Now if only that 3DS *Project Diva* game was confirmed for a UK release...



Above: The first minigame plays like a cross between *Rhythm Heaven* and *Space Channel 5*. Which is perfectly okay with us.



FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE MUSIC?

Decent enough but not exactly memorable. *Rhythm Thief* definitely lacks a standout tune or song.

Q. AND THE STORY?

Though it's well presented, animated and acted, the basic plot of *Rhythm Thief* isn't much to write home about. It's standard mystery fare.

Q. ANYTHING ELSE?

Well, there's some StreetPass functionality and lots of optional extras to unlock. If you really like *Rhythm Thief* then you'll certainly get your money's worth.

on burying its minigames under layers of padding so difficult to understand.

It's a problem of pacing more than anything else. If *Rhythm Thief* threw a minigame at you as often as *Professor Layton* does puzzles then its awkward structure would be practically invisible. You'd be too busy tapping along to the tunes to notice. But that kind of pacing would be unrealistic on a development level, of course. The hundreds of original songs that would need to be written and recorded, not to mention the game design and artistic resources needed, would likely make *Rhythm Thief* the most expensive game of its kind. Even Sega's modest effort to populate its game with content shows signs of an over-stretched budget, and within the first two hours of play you'll notice that almost all of the minigame designs are reused and recycled throughout Phantom R's story.

Perhaps if there was something more interactive about the exploratory portion of *Rhythm Thief*, the low frequency of rhythm-action-action wouldn't be so galling, but plodding through the streets of Paris, no matter how amusing the dialogue of its citizens, feels like a cheap way of stretching out the game length. Which was actually an unnecessary trick if you ask us. The rhythm games are just about difficult enough that they'd need to be played repeatedly to earn the best possible grades, and this would give *Rhythm Thief* all the longevity required. Indeed, if you happen upon a friend's copy of the game, with all the rhythm parts unlocked and ready to play individually, there's definitely a few hours of fun to be had here. Finding a friend willing to grind through the game to do that for you, though: that would be a treasure worthy of an emperor.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

BAD BLEND: *Rhythm Thief's* attempt to combine rhythm-action and adventure games should be applauded, but the execution sadly leaves something to be desired. The mix isn't quite right.

VERDICT 6/10

MISSES A COUPLE OF BEATS

Below: Just like the *Professor Layton* games, *Rhythm Thief* features hidden coins secreted in the background of each area. They can then be spent on bonus features and aides.



HAIR-RAISINGLY HARDCORE

Skullgirls

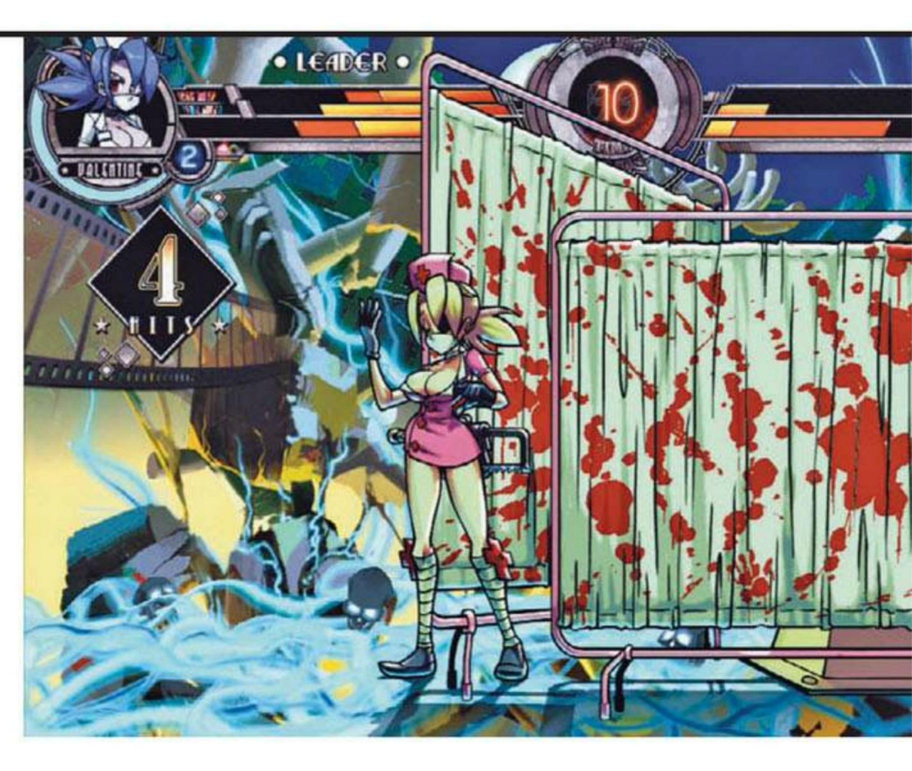
Just as taking on *Call Of Duty* in the FPS market is a hell of an ask for even an established studio or franchise, going toe-to-toe with the heavyweights of the fighting scene is an unenviable task. But even today's brightest stars were rookies on the scene once upon a time and with a passionate and talented team behind it, *Skullgirls* is as solid and entertaining a developmental gambit as we've seen in many a year.

Like *BlazBlue* before it and *Street Fighter II* before that, *Skullgirls* boasts the expected 'new fighting IP' modest roster, with just eight playable characters – two of them are even locked from the outset, limiting your initial options further still. But as with the best fighters, variety proves itself to be more important than quantity as you run through the available fighters before settling on a team. Filia is seen as the game's equivalent of a Ryu/Ken 'standard', though her ground-based projectiles and hair-fuelled dives and lunges make her feel more like *SFIII*'s Twelve than the gi-clad go-tos. Which, actually, is a fair assessment of the game as a whole – when the simplest character is the equivalent of one of *Street Fighter*'s most confusing options, it's fair to assume that this is a game targeted at the hardcore end of the market. This assumption is backed up as you delve deeper into the other characters too, each bending the underlying system with rules and properties of their own. Painwheel's charged attacks and flight, Valentine's various poison debuff attacks, Peacock's many traps and zoning tools, Ms. Fortune's removable head (which effectively becomes a second character)... there's a lot to take on board in terms of even entry-level character-specific stuff, though the fundamental mechanics on which these sit are submerged at the fighting pool's deep end as well.

Constants are rare in the world of *Skullgirls*, so even the basic system is a challenge to learn and master. Far closer to the likes of *Arcana Heart* and *Melty Blood* than *Street Fighter*, the combo system rewards experimentation and hours spent in the lab with a couple of extra notches on the hit counter every time you land something new (and a new description as well – every number on the hit count has its own bespoke flavour text, rather quaintly). Wall bounces, relaunches and OTG attacks are staple parts of most decent combos, the simple combo rule being that if it looks like something might be able to connect, it probably will. To offset this and avoid newcomers rage-quitting every time they get caught in a death loop, the system is cleverly coded to look out for infinite combo

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Reverge Labs
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Below: Backdrops are lavishly drawn and exquisitely lit, plus well populated. Expect the most entertaining background characters to arrive as DLC, too.



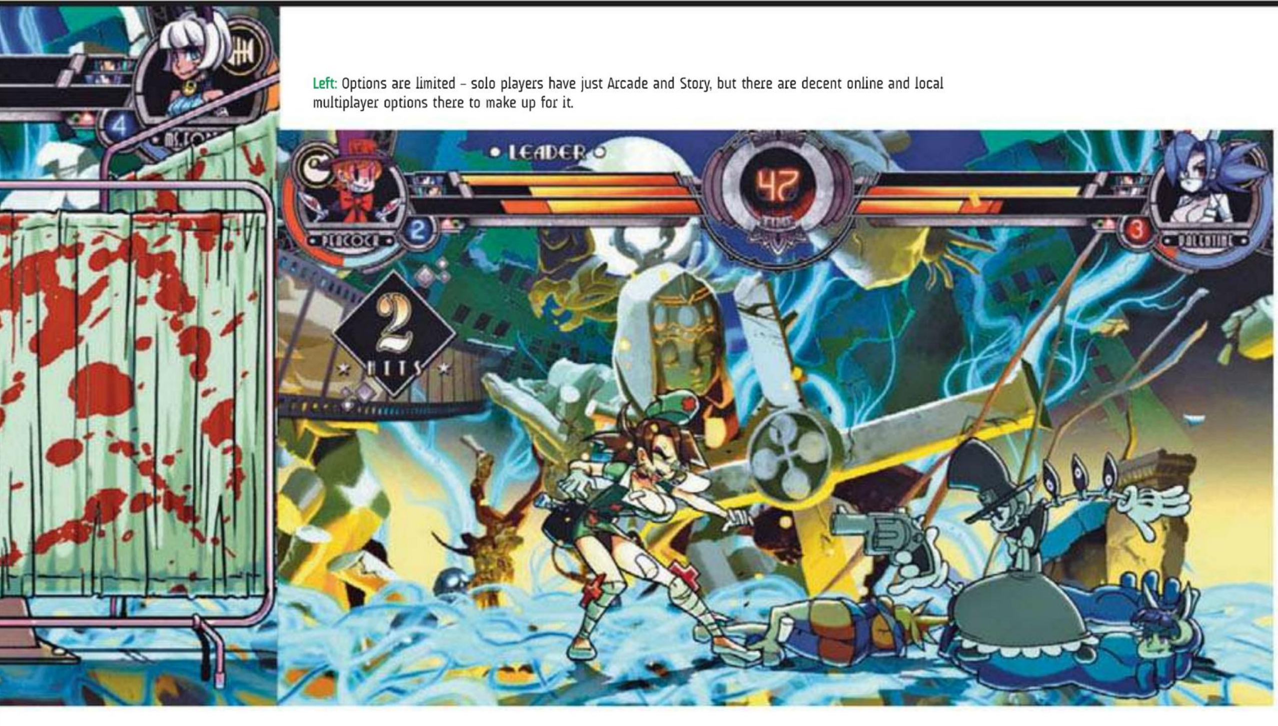
Right: Blockbuster combos can be linked together between characters, not unlike *Marvel Vs. Capcom*'s DHC technique.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ASSIST ME: The attacks used by partner characters when called in can be customised to your liking.
HEART DECO: The presentation and 'early cinema' vibe is beautiful, complementing the misfit cast wonderfully.

CONSTANTS ARE RARE IN THE WORLD OF SKULLGIRLS, SO EVEN THE BASIC SYSTEM IS A CHALLENGE TO LEARN AND MASTER



Left: Options are limited – solo players have just Arcade and Story, but there are decent online and local multiplayer options there to make up for it.



FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?

Just eight to start with, plus one crazy CPU-only boss.

Q. IS THAT ENOUGH?

It is and it isn't – it's great for character focus and learning match-ups, though the tag-based nature of the game means you'll often see the same teams.

Q. ANY MORE COMING?

Yup. Reverge already has several DLC characters in the works, with more possibly down the line.

THREE'S A CROWD

Skullgirls' team-based mechanics take their cues from the *Capcom Vs. SNK* fighters, offering players the choice to take one, two or three fighters into battle. This is no handicap, though, and as in real life there are distinct and very different benefits to both going solo and enjoying a threesome. Electing to take just one character is a brave move, sacrificing team-based combo extensions and defensive options in order to see vastly improved damage output and survivability. But those additional features can be more or less useful depending on which characters you use – an aggressive solo Cerebella, for instance, can punish most characters with just a couple of throws, but with a little support and pressure from assists, those throws will be much easier to land…



cycles and offer an easy escape after a couple of rotations. It's a neat feature, and one backed up by other aspects of the core system in order to present as level a playing field as possible – boons like off-the-ground pick-ups and staggers tend to only work once per combo before they are either stripped away or scaled back, for instance.

And with so well thought-out, deep and complex a system, perhaps the most useful part of *Skullgirls* is the comprehensive tutorial. Somehow managing to offer newcomers a hands-on guided tour of the main mechanics while not patronising combo fiends and finger gymnasts, it's a wonderfully laid out step-by-step guide to not just this game but all fighters. As well as lessons specific to Reverge's debut fighter, general fighting terms and techniques are explained and taught as well – those looking to make the leap up from mid-tier play to a higher level would do well to pick up *Skullgirls* purely for its educational merit, something we can't say to be true of any fighter since perhaps *Virtua Fighter 4 Evolution*.

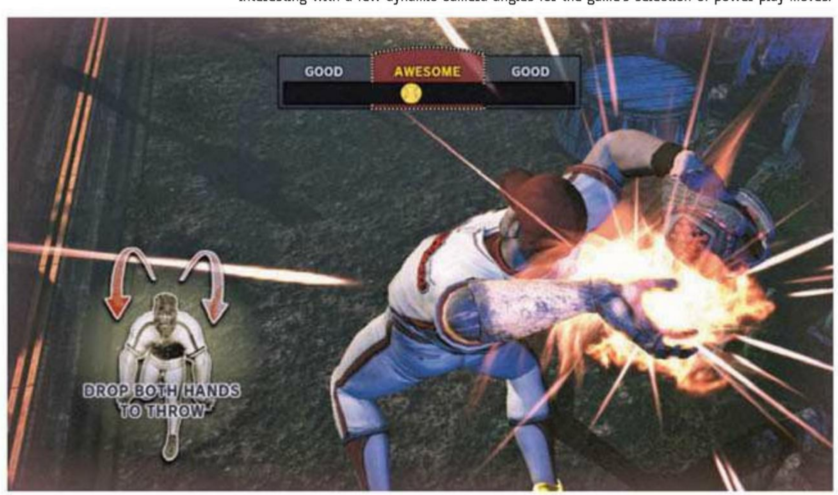
Considering it does such a good job of preparing average players for the next level, though, it's a little strange that *Skullgirls* does an equally good job of ditching them after the seminar. The basics learned, the tutorial over and an amusingly named Achievement banked, things starts to get a bit shaky when Reverge removes the stabilisers. The practice rooms are oddly under-equipped compared to those of most modern fighters – the static dummy can be controlled by a second player, sure, but there's no option to program it or have the AI take over for defensive drills. There's not even a move list to consult or any character-specific hints, trials or sample combos to work with, and, while teaching players about punishing unsafe attacks is a good start, it's not much good without at least suggesting a few half-decent ways in which to do so. That said, there's a distinctly novel appeal and definite sense of reward to discovering everything for yourself – the days of fiddling around trying to work out Fatalities might be long gone but, as *Dark Souls* expertly demonstrated, there's a lot to be said for slapping modern gaming in the face for trying to hold our hands too often.

Stunning design, lighting and animation should be enough to win the hearts of all those curious enough to dip a toe into the trial version, but the real question hangs over whether the understaffed character select screen and daunting depth will put people off dropping the cash to upgrade to the full version. DLC plans are already in place to address the first issue, and hopefully either a title update or the inevitable user-made FAQs and dedicated forums will help with the latter. By any standards, it's a storming opener from the 'by the hardcore, for the hardcore' startup, though we can't help but wonder if lowering the entry barrier a little might help grow *Skullgirls*' player base to the level it needs (and indeed deserves) to be at in order to be successful.

VERDICT 7/10

PROOF THAT YOU CAN MAKE A GREAT FIGHTER ON A BUDGET

Below: Despite featuring a mainly static player, *Diabolical Pitch* manages to keep things visually interesting with a few dynamic camera angles for the game's selection of power play moves.





Above: The hokey nightmare narrative that frames the pitch-miming is exactly as daft as you would expect Grasshopper to make it.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Grasshopper Manufacture
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN RISE OF NIGHTMARES





WORSE THAN THE GUNSTRINGER

THIS GAME HAS BEEN THROWN

Diabolical Pitch

Having delivered *Frog Minutes, Shadows Of The Damned* and *Sine Mora* in the last year, the output of Grasshopper Manufacture is becoming as diverse as it is strange and ridiculous. Here, the team turns its attention to what in the hands of most developers would be a simple, motion-controlled fairground game, but in the hands of Suda 51 it becomes an Americana-infused journey through a dreamlike horrorscape filled with people dressed in sinister animal costumes. Indeed, despite its home on Xbox Live Arcade and its Kinect-only control scheme, *Diabolical Pitch* is as much a Grasshopper product in spirit as anything else the studio has been responsible for; it's occasionally unsettling, surreal and played almost exclusively for laughs. It's a shame, then, that its punchline is so often stepped on by control inconsistencies that ensure gameplay can't quite keep up with the on-screen action.

In terms of Kinect titles, *Diabolical Pitch* is most closely related to Twisted Pixel's *The Gunstringer*, only with baseballs replacing bullets and the Old West swapped out in favour of a dark carnival. With the player static at the front of the screen, one arm is used to lock on to the approaching horde of enemy targets, while the other is tasked with pitching an endless supply of balls to defeat them. If an enemy throws a projectile – either a spiked ball or a circular saw blade – the player must hold both arms out to catch the projectile, or jump or crouch in order to avoid taking damage. And if enemies get too close for comfort, players can fall back on a limited supply of last-minute kicks to avoid punishment.

It's a simple setup, and one that would seem enormously undernourished in any pad-controlled videogame. However, considering the pace of the action – particularly after the first area is complete, and flying enemies start to swoop down in quick succession – it's as much as Kinect controls can handle, and perhaps just a little bit more. Disappointingly, the least reliable gesture in the entire game is the standard pitch, with Kinect apparently suffering from some depth issues that cause it to ignore throws that aren't performed in an over-the-top manner. And considering one missed pitch can often mean the difference between life and death, it means that players need to overact themselves into fatigue, limiting the length of each playtime before arm-ache sets in.

Equally problematic are the gesture-specific special moves available, which act as screen-filling smart bombs when they work, but far too often don't activate instinctively, thereby making them the equivalent of in-game Russian roulette, and much better ignored in favour of quickfire ball-throwing. Again, it's unfortunate, because there's a huge amount of character and a worthy progression system included here, but fundamental control niggles mean very few players will persevere to unlock everything *Diabolical Pitch* has to offer.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LUCKY SEVEN: Bonuses are awarded for knocking down sets of fruit machine icons. **FRIGHT NIGHT:** It's about a baseball player with a bionic arm, led into a haunted theme park by a guy with an elephant's head.

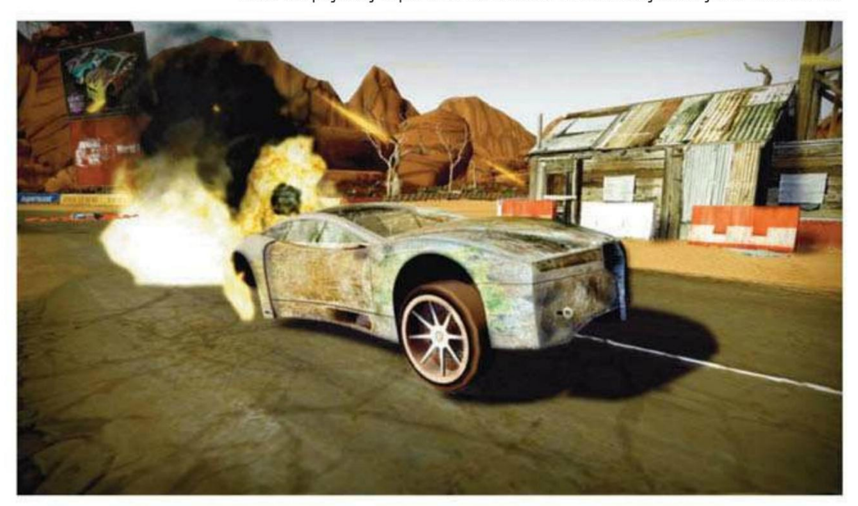


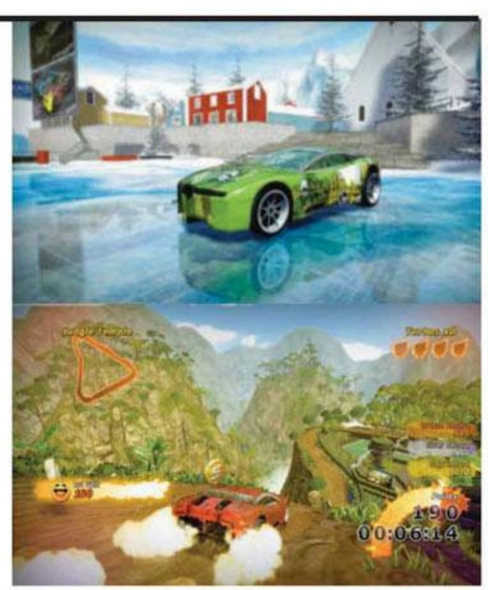




VERDICT 4/10
ONE STRIKE AND A SEVERAL FOUL BALLS

Below: Wrecked aims to be a light, fun multiplayer game in the mould of *Micro Machines*, but it lacks both the charm and playability to pull it off. The camera in *MicMacs* rarely forced you to crash and fail.





A LOAD OF OLD BANGERS FROM THE TEAM BEHIND MASHED

Wrecked: Revenge Revisited

Games are often defined by a single trait. With this in mind, we pose a single question: have you ever been forced to slow down in order to speed up? Bizarrely, *Wrecked* insists you do so. To receive a boost, you must hold the brake and then tap the accelerator twice in quick succession. Like Usain Bolt removing his shoes in the middle of a race, this makes little sense. Unfortunately, such sloppy design choices are representative of Supersonic Software's entire product, which stutters before crashing to a sudden halt.

Yes, eight years after the arrival of *Mashed*, the developer has produced an unfinished sequel that never lives up to the cult status of its older brother. What can go wrong with cars, guns, and friends? As *Wrecked* quickly shows, an awful lot. With six tracks and 24 single-player challenges, this game short-changes those who want to play alone. Even newcomers will complete all objectives in less than two hours. The slight variations on travelling from A to B rarely ignite any sense of fun, as the developer employs a bunch of dull and lifeless tasks to wade through. Players are forced to destroy three opponents as quickly as possible, drop mines on static targets, and evade hilariously docile traps. Imagination is lacking, as tugging a caravan around an ice rink presents the most thrilling action on offer.

Furthermore, when races do get exciting, a terrible camera ruins the spectacle. It's clear Supersonic wants to install a dynamic viewpoint that recreates car chases from Hollywood. The ambition may be clear, but the implementation is extremely different. Moving around corners, the camera will swing towards a new position, zooming in and out within a couple of seconds. It twists and turns, making the track appear different and altering your control. At vital moments, the camera has a tendency to bemuse by overcomplicating an otherwise simple formula.

Online multiplayer fares slightly better than the lone journey, but only for a short while. Races are riddled with connection problems, galvanising the probability of silly mistakes. Competitive play is humorously chaotic, but it's difficult to continually engage with such a tight-fisted product, as the lack of online options and tracks ensure the cheap laughs soon die out.

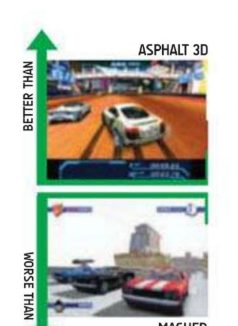
In the right company, local multiplayer is the most attractive aspect of this lazy package. Watching cars fly off the track at all angles is oddly engrossing when reactions can be seen. As each player strives to get away from the elimination line, the use of weapons provides the game with a hint of personality. Whether you're firing guided missiles into the rear of the leader, or shunting nearby opponents off track, playing on a single screen ramps up the pressure considerably.

Indeed, everything is better with friends – including shoddy combat racing – but despite offering a decent night of entertainment for groups of players, *Wrecked*'s downfalls are never overcome.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Supersonic Software
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — ASPHALT 3D

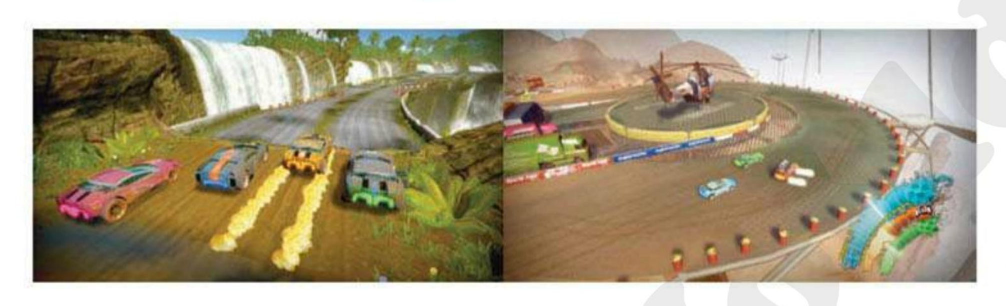


WORSE THAN — MASHED

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE, MORE, MORE!: *Wrecked* needs many more maps and weapons before it can even entertain the idea of having longevity. **VIEW TO A KILL:** A terrible 'dynamic' camera causes all sorts of control issues.





VERDICT 4/10
STUCK IN FIRST GEAR

YOU'LL NEVER FIND A MORE WRETCHED HIVE OF SCUM AND VILLAINY

Kinect Star Wars

It begins with space – about six feet by eight feet should cover it. This modest dimension of living area is all it takes to finally live out your fanboy fantasy: the first proper lightsaber game. Well, that's the theory, anyway, and what the press release tells you, as John Williams' score and a bunch of 'bwowm' noises fire off in your head. In truth, *Kinect Star Wars* is a bit rubbish.

Naturally, the actions involved will be second nature to most players, who have practised this half a million times over the course of their lives: fist gripped around the imaginary hilt of an intergalactic laser sword, spare hand outstretched hopelessly trying to make an inanimate breadbin just shift slightly closer. These gestures are the meat and potatoes of what make's the game's central story mode vaguely work – we're ignoring the fact that the story plonks players into the lull of *Episode III*'s dire plot. Swiping at lumpish battle droids and thrusting a palm out to Force Push enemies into oblivion is intuitive, and there's a satisfying responsiveness to offensive and defensive manoeuvres.

The visuals are slick and instantly recognisable enough to perpetuate the fantasy further, but gameplay quickly grows tiresome as the same handful of gestures is heavily recycled. It's a problem compounded by the aggravating duel battles, a protracted standoff that undermines both established skill and natural instinct.

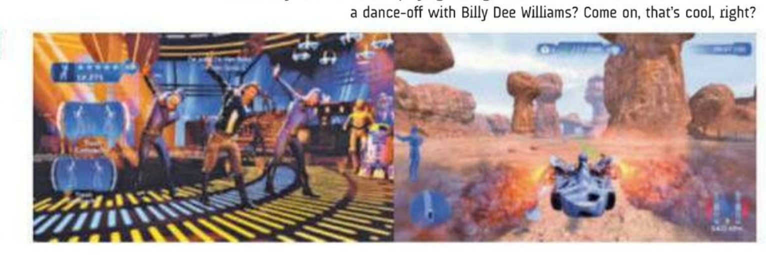
Spring out of the main campaign and you're welcomed by droids R2D2 and C3PO, who usher players between different periods in the canon to pointlessly contextualise the included minigames. By far the best of this ragtag bunch would be the podracing – a suitably thrilling next-gen adaptation of the N64 racer. It's a mode that could easily eclipse the main campaign if only it didn't fuss-up the whole scenario with arbitrary gestures (swatting bugs off the screen, throwing Jedi training orbs), which detract hugely from the buzz of the only contribution to the new trilogy that didn't feel absolutely contrived.

What's left is the Rancor rampage mode – which levels the dusty streets of Tatooine as you manically flail and munch citizens with a surprising lack of fulfilment – and the much talked about dance mode, which takes the framework of *Dance Central* and populates it with dancing Stormtroopers, Han Solo and slave-girl Leia, jiving to pop songs given a *Star Wars* twist. It's painful to see, horridly inaccurate and *Star Wars Holiday Special* levels of sacrilegious, but (and whisper this) it is inexplicably fun.

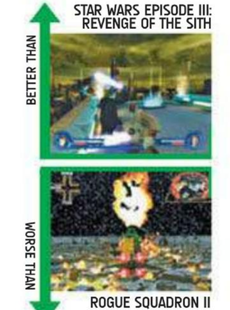
Kinect Star Wars is a hodgepodge of ideas that, either through the Kinect's limited functionality or slipshod execution, simply aren't cohesive or sophisticated enough to deliver the *Star Wars* experience that fans demand. Our advice? Go outside and pick up a stick. Bwowm.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Terminal Reality
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: It's nowhere near as technically competent as *Dance Central*, but there are undoubtedly larks to be had playing through the dance battle mode. Harrison Ford in a dance-off with Billy Dee Williams? Come on, that's cool, right?



SYNTHESIS

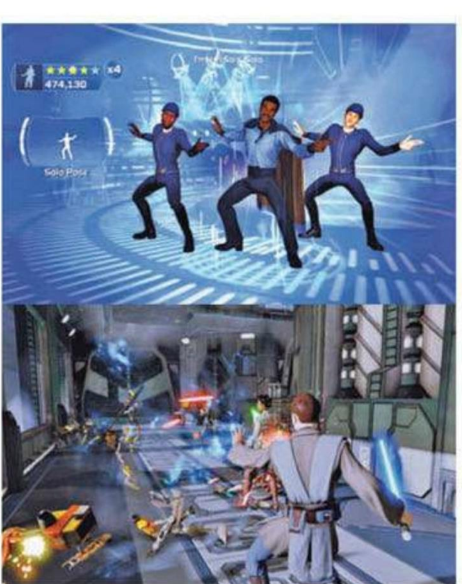
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

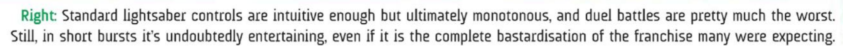
STAR WHORES: Action-combat, racing and dancing comprise some of *Kinect Stars Wars'* collection of minigames. A case of being a Jack of all trades, Jedi Master of none.

VERDICT 4/10

YOU'D HAVE TO FORCE US TO PLAY IT AGAIN







Right: Standard lightsaber controls are intuitive enough but ultimately monotonous, and duel battles are pretty much the worst. Still, in short bursts it's undoubtedly entertaining, even if it is the complete bastardisation of the franchise many were expecting.

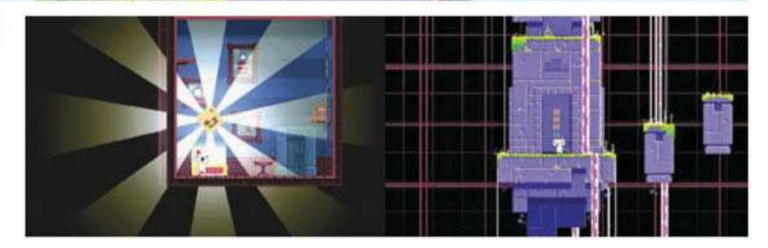
The world looks beautiful as it rotates before you and its various elements rearrange into new platforming conundrums.

IS IT BECAUSE I IS BLOCK?

Fez*

DETAILS

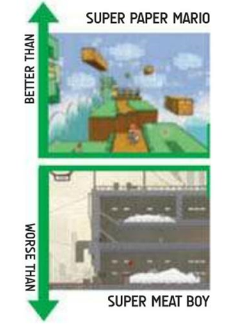
FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Polytron
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



It was always clear *Fez* was going to look the part. Winning an industry award for its graphics in 2008 – three years before release – was a clear indicator that developers and players alike had fallen in love with Polytron's slick pixel art style and cutesy incidental detailing. It doesn't disappoint in this regard – tiny four-pixel caterpillars and other adorable fauna wander around sparse, curiously isolated islands, while passing clouds cast hazy shadows across pathways awash with buckets, shovels and intricately sun-baked masonry. Lighthouses and belltowers loom over the landscape like a pixelated *Myst*, and the haunting synth soundtrack will take you to a similar place. But despite its stunning presentation, it's still the gameplay within that provides *Fez*'s greatest case for 'classic' status.

Fez is set in a world which, to its cutesy, pixelated inhabitants, is experienced only in two dimensions. That is, until player character Gomez acquires – in one of gaming's most striking prologue sequences – a dimension-warping piece of headgear.

The titular fez sets up the simple conceit that will fuel much of the rest of the game's platform-puzzler gameplay. A quick squeeze of LT or RT rotates the game's environment 90 degrees, turning walls, platforms and doorways in place on a central axis. But the world itself refuses to accept this 3D shift, meaning it's actually a rearrangement of the 2D plane – depth of field a non-issue as platforms move in mid-air to create or remove routes. Beyond a playful comment on game design itself, this becomes the basis for gameplay that runs magnificently with the idea, with plentiful memorable moments cropping up only minutes apart throughout Gomez's journey.



While every main area of *Fez* effectively concerns rotating elements around a central vertical structure, twists on this concept are many and various. From speedily rotating a tower clad in cracked masonry in order to chain together explosions from a bomb placed at the bottom, to realigning patches of ivy in timed conditions to ascend the screen, Polytron throws around new ideas – or engaging twists on established ones - with a flurry of invention rarely seen outside a *Mario* title.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BLOCK OF TEXT: There's a whole language of mysterious symbols scattered through *Fez*, translation of which is necessary to complete the game. It's an unforeseen extra level of depth from Polytron.

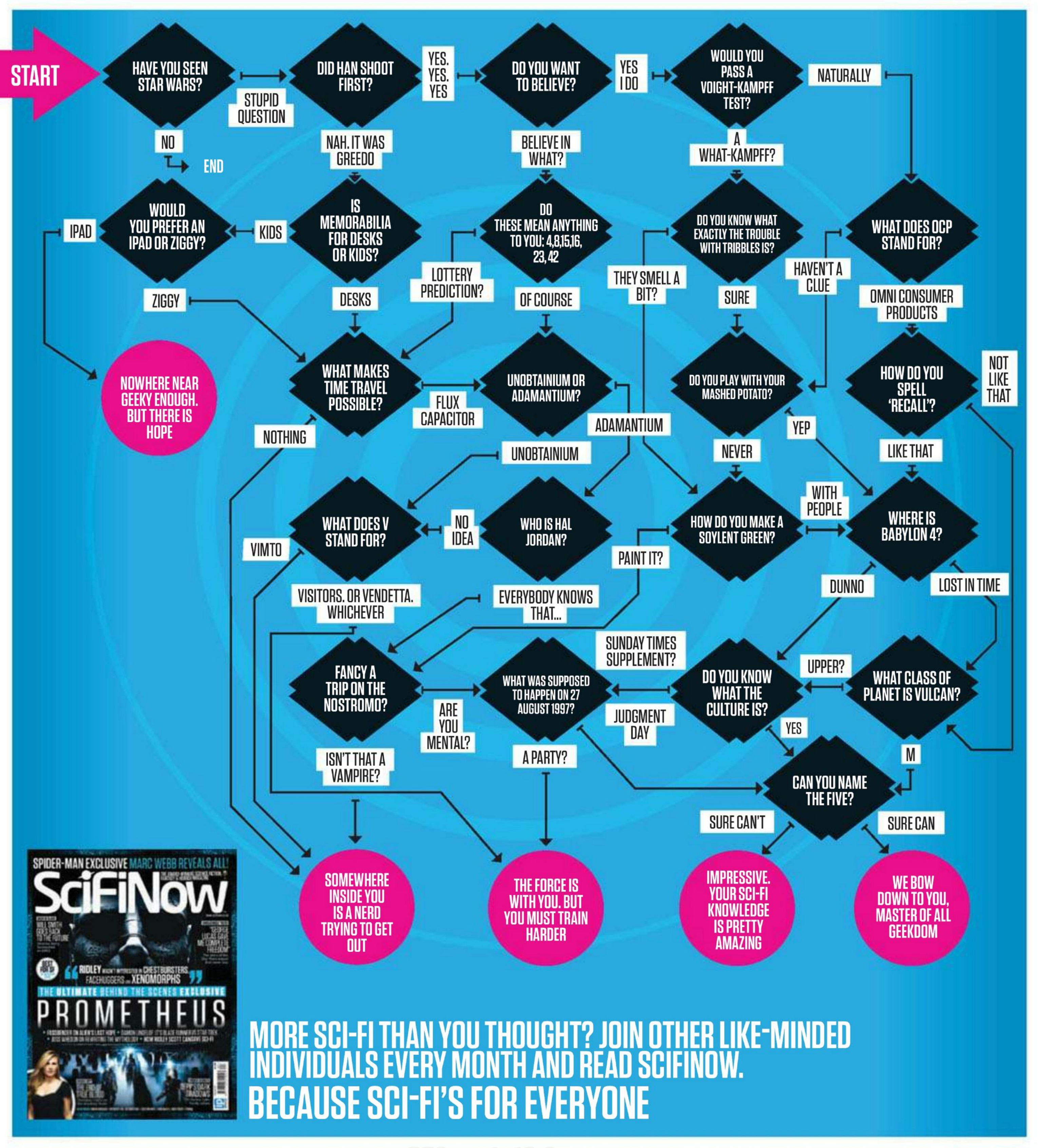
But beyond the cheeky technical tricks and mind-warping perspective platforming lies a subtler (some would say much darker) heart to *Fez*. On a basic level, Gomez's mission is to collect 32 cubes in order to balance out a world skewed by his powers, many of which have been broken into even smaller parts. But for every cube, he is told by his mysterious spectral companion early on, there is an anti-cube. And it's tracking down all of these which really keeps *Fez* ticking – and when Polytron gets seriously devious. QR codes, strange diagrams, and even tips hidden in the Achievements list are only some of the keys to ferret out these hidden pickups, but it's a crazed urgency that you'll embrace until completion, threading your way round Polytron's crazily idiosyncratic open-world masterpiece until every corner has been reached and, more importantly, understood.

VERDICT 9/10

PROOF THAT A GOOD IDEAS ARE WORTH WAITING FOR

HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

Use the SciFiNow flowchart to find out…



NO TRIBULATIONS

Trials Evolution

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: RedLynx
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: TRIALS HD

WORSE THAN: LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

***Trials HD* was a crunchy-crack snack of a game.** That 'just one more go' addictiveness, so rarely seen in the modern videogame, it had by the bucketload. Its simplicity was its greatest virtue: guide the trials bike along a 2D line amid a 3D-rendered course; make minute adjustments to its balance and speed; reach the end in the shortest possible time in a single unbroken run.

It was a formula bolstered by the inclusion of the best times of the people on your friends list, their ghosts marked at the top of the display so that, as you played through each track, you could see exactly how well you fared by comparison. *Trials* addiction, for a time, became a norm in the lives of many gamers. It was even the best-selling title in the history of Xbox Live Arcade for a while, on account of the self-propagating word of mouth that rippled out from it.

Trials Evolution does a number of things that are notable. For a start, the learning curve has been ironed flat. There are few brick walls. There is greater verticality to the courses in general but, unlike *Trials HD*, hard or extreme level tracks do not lead directly to tantrums and shouts of 'impossible!'. *Trials HD* was prone to this, and especially detestable when half your mates were clearly having no trouble with it whatsoever, or at least some of them had the patience to persevere for however many dozen tongue-biting hours it took to defeat the track at hand.

Trials Evolution teaches how to tackle each obstacle and throws them at you in a gradual way, so that when you do reach courses populated with back-to-back tricky obstacles you will have already had enough previous experience of them to overcome the whole thing without either a broken controller or pulsing temples.

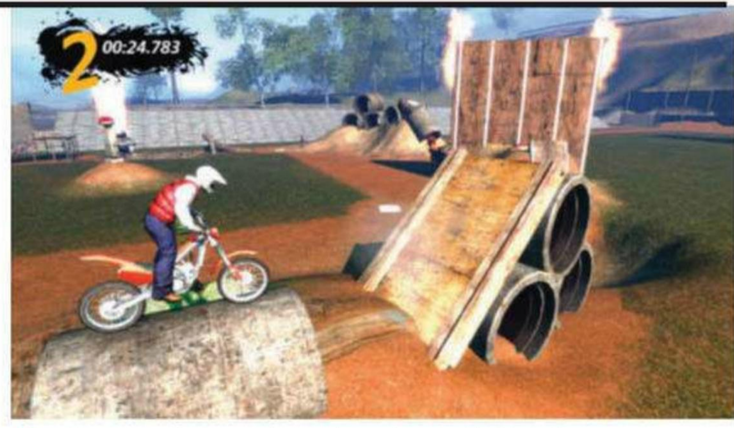
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE ACCESSIBLE: Not easier; just a learning curve that is a far smoother ride. **PRO TOOLS:** You can make your own videogame with it. Any kind of videogame. Physics degree not included.

The track editor makes a return, only this time in two distinct flavours. The Lite Editor is a tool much as it was in *Trials HD*. Players can draw a racing line onto any of a number of predetermined environments, then simply build obstacles onto it. Tracks are then shared online and rated by other players. The Pro Editor is a complex beast that offers players access to the game's engine. It's quite possible to make 2D shooters, racers and even an FPS. However, it is not a feature the vast majority of players will possess the will to learn – a feat that will take the average gamer months of trial and error. It is niche, but since a core of people will no doubt emerge who will create magnificent concepts with it, and since we can all download them, the Pro Editor constitutes excellent added value.

Trials Evolution is exactly as its title suggests: it is *Trials HD* with bells, whistles and a ton of refinement. It is prettier, its four-player local multiplayer is a solid-gold hoot, and its overall challenge is both lasting and addictive.



Below: With a greater emphasis on creating gameplay experiences outside of the basic motorbike variations, *Trials Evolution* includes a whole host of bizarre minigames from skiing on mud to landing and landing flying saucers on various targets.





Above: The Lite Editor still manages to be a fairly complex affair. With fiddly object placement and the need to constantly test your creations, don't expect to be able to whip up a masterpiece in minutes. Like all other parts of the game, it takes practice.

VERDICT 8/10

RECOMMENDED TO ANYONE WITH A NET CONNECTION



Above: Taking out a criminal's car can involve a painfully drawn-out chase sequence.

COP CARS AND CLOWNSHOES

Crash Time 4: The Syndicate

If you were asked to describe the heart-in-mouth adrenaline overdose of a high-speed motorway pursuit, what words would you use? Exhilarating? Terrifying, maybe? What about functional, or clinical, or workmanlike? No, we wouldn't choose that last batch either, but someone at Synetic did. Presumably the developer did some research, of course – we're just guessing what it must be like without any first-hand knowledge – so we're forced to defer to experience. And as a result, we can confirm that the cold, sterile world of *Crash Time 4* perfectly captures the overwhelming blandness of chasing down bad guys on a road with no speed limit.

The fourth game to be based on German TV series *Alarm Für Cobra 11 – Die Autobahnpolizei*, *The Syndicate* is the gaming equivalent of a mid-range sports car fitted with a lawnmower engine; it doesn't look awful – in fact, the bodyshell is mostly shiny enough to hide any scratches – but try pushing it through its paces and you're going to end up with a face full of black smoke. Which, as it turns out, is an apt analogy, since someone getting a cloud of soot thrown at them is invariably amusing, and *Crash Time 4* can count the fact it is regularly, inadvertently hilarious as its biggest asset.

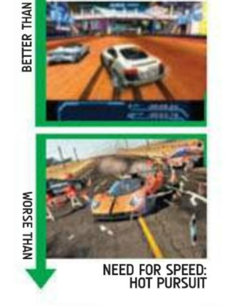
Apart from the chortles, though, it's blank, emotionless driving all the way. Eight square kilometres of Cologne have been recreated for your automotive inconvenience, with over 100km of roads to explore, chase down criminals, and get frustrated on as you fail to ram those criminals off the road. The lookalike selection of unlicensed cars are a little too slippy-slidey to comfortably rag around town, and it's about as visually stimulating as you would expect a facsimile of, say, England's fourth-largest city (Leeds) to be. However, overlook how every other car on the road is missing its driver, and how the physical resistance of other vehicles veers from non-corporeal to unbreakable without warning, and everything works exactly as much as it needs to in order to pass a basic QA test – and not one iota more.

Indeed, there are so many half-measures evident in *The Syndicate* – from the way 'cut-scenes' leave the camera swirling around a building for which the team had neither the budget nor inclination to render the interior, to the infuriating amount of time it takes the behind-the-car-cam to swing back to its home position after a crash – that any amount of fun that could be taken is quickly beaten down by detached, impassive functionality.

There are some laughs to be had at its expense, and everything here works, but that's absolutely all it does, and as a result even the most patient fan of conforming to the highway code in a sensible manner will have difficulty seeing it through to the end.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: dtp Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Synetic
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



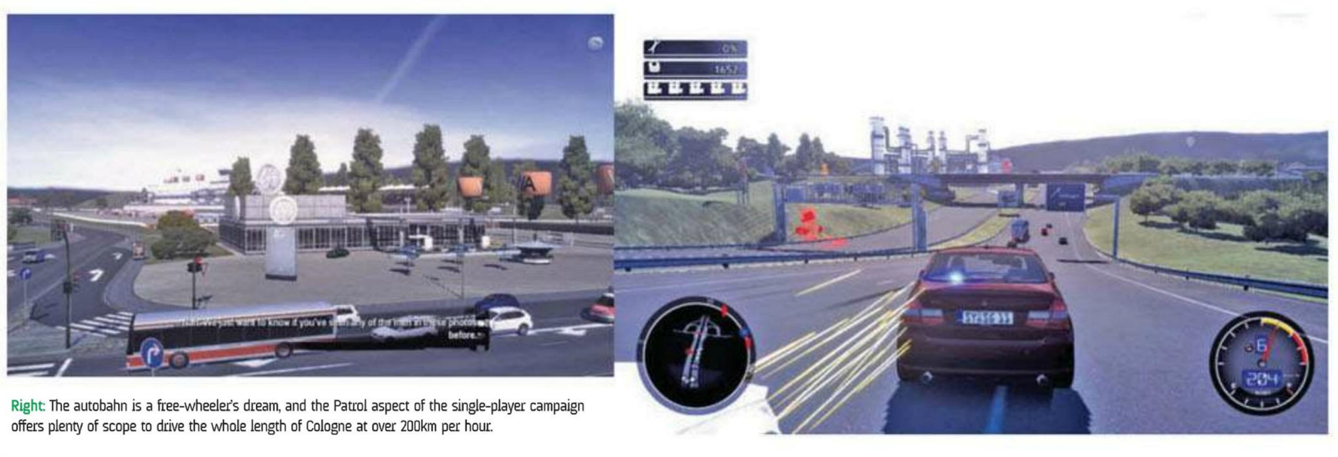
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IN UND AUTO: Drive from A to B. Now drive back to A. Now follow that guy, seemingly forever. Now ram him off the road. Now drive back to B. Have 30 Gamerpoints for your trouble. Next level: more of the same.



VORSPRUNG DIRGE TECHNIK



Right: The autobahn is a free-wheeler's dream, and the Patrol aspect of the single-player campaign offers plenty of scope to drive the whole length of Cologne at over 200km per hour.

PHONE-AL FANTASY

Chaos Rings II



Above: This mansion acts as the game's central hub. Here you can buy new items from the shop, chat to the various characters and change around equipment. The majority of the game's story takes place here, through prolonged dialogue exchanges and bizarre dream sequences.

The *Chaos Rings* franchise underlines Square Enix's understanding that iOS can be a platform for dense, plot-driven role-playing sagas. Strip its idiosyncrasies down to the core – dispensing with labyrinthine level design, bloated length and open-world landscapes – and you have the potential for an epic as pure to the original spirit of pre-CD RPGs as you can get.

Chaos Rings II doesn't stray far from the original game and its prequel, making slight tweaks to the established formula. The most noticeable of the bunch is a new charge gauge that builds towards powerful Awakening attacks, while elsewhere there's some inconsequential shuffling of magical and elemental abilities.

Turn-based combat excels in its short, punchy bursts. Exquisitely balanced and featuring a wealth of different combat approaches, there's a depth here that seems unprecedented on the platform. Random enemy encounters are scattered across environments, crucial in levelling-up before the boss battle that punctuates the end of each chapter. However, as sublime as strategising the next duel is, there's both a noticeable difficulty spike early in the main story and a disappointing lack of inventiveness to creature design.

It's a noticeable blip in an otherwise seamless presentation. Static backgrounds resemble intricate paintings; from a desolate Japanese cityscape to a sumptuous oriental garden, no two environments ever feel the same. You arrive in these distinct regions of the game's fantasy world purely at random, the game sending you on various missions as Darwin – the focal point of the narrative – sets about saving the world.

Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, but to get lost in the nonsensical melancholic goings-on of the plot would only dilute the experience. Nevertheless, the tosh is unavoidable, the game spending too much time in dialogue windows, featuring trite exchanges between archetypes that are long since outdated. It complicates matters further by constantly alternating your two-man party before enabling customisation; upgrading secondary characters is a nightmare of guesswork and spiky hair micromanagement, never quite knowing who you're going to be paired with before embarking on the next mission. The lack of subtlety and gentle transitioning is mostly alienating.

Still, the simple combat and bite-sized level design make it a uniquely engaging experience, and one that, despite its shortcomings, remains deep and complex. With some polish, *Chaos Rings* has every chance of being ingratiated into Square Enix's top pedigree of fantasy RPGs.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPhone
OTHER FORMATS: iPad
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Media.Vision
PRICE: £12.99/£13.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — CHAOS RINGS



WORSE THAN — FINAL FANTASY VII





ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MAGIC +1: Genes have been replaced in the sequel by Sopia, which act as magical attacks. These can be upgraded to unlock new abilities as your characters levels-up during missions.

VERDICT 6/10

ACCOMPLISHED AND COMPLEX – SHAME THE STORY'S DROSS

Below: Level design manages to hit a consistently stunning level. However, each new landscape is broken up by bland netherworld portals, which are both perplexing and repetitive.





KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE AND YOUR ENEMIES AT 400 YARDS MINIMUM

Sniper Elite V2

There's a propaganda film-within-a-film in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* called *Stolz Der Nation*, in which German sniper Frederick Zoller singlehandedly kills 87 bazillion allied troops advancing on his bell-tower eyrie. It's absurd, undoubtedly hammed-up to portray the young soldier as a hero by Goebbels and his propaganda machine – but within the outrageous context of the Tarantino flick it is somewhat plausible.

Sniper Elite V2 is the American equivalent of *Stolz Der Nation*: it features an OSS sniper disguised as a German officer and sent into 1945 Germany to take out prominent targets, in an effort to prevent V2 rocket scientists from falling into the hands of the Russians as Nazi Germany crumbles. It's an outrageously unrealistic tin-can alley of Nazi-killing, but it's nonetheless fun to play for it.

No small portion of *Sniper Elite V2* is spent sneaking around in a traditional stealthy way. You're an assassin first and a marksman second, and while you might not be able to get anywhere near your mark to stick a dagger in his back, the unsuspecting German soldiers that mill around the tatters of Berlin and come between you and a nice piece of elevated cover don't have the luxury of an armoured escort. So assassination missions have a similar ring to them: hunker down with the circle button, hugging broken buildings and low walls with triangle, and then wait for the lone patrolman, out of sight of his fellows, to turn his back before you can creep close, strike with X and perform the time-honoured 'wet' kill neck-breaker. A quick rummage through his pockets is almost compulsory before you can drag his corpse into the shadows where he can't be found, and there's a good reason for that.

Ammunition and items, such as the dynamite, land mines and trip-wires you can set up to guard your escape once the deed is done, are scarce. You start each mission with a handful of bullets for your silenced pistol and M1 Machine Gun – enough to get you out of a pinch if your cover is blown – but not enough to maintain any kind of sustained attack. You do start with an abundance of bullets for your Springfield rifle, however, usually a hundred or so, with more at ammunition dumps dotted around the site. Considering a single shot usually takes an enemy out regardless of where he's hit, you should easily be able to budget your sniper ammunition for the level.

It's clearly Rebellion's intention to make it difficult for players to treat *Sniper Elite V2* as a bog-standard shooter; not only is machine-gun ammunition hard to come by but your man isn't very robust – although he can take a few shots, you'd better pray there's cover nearby if you do. Closing the distance and opening fire with your M1 isn't a great idea under normal circumstances, either, because the enemy tends to swarm on your position in much larger numbers than you anticipated. Nope, there's

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Rebellion
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Right: Challenge mode can put you in the shoes of a master sniper, defeating wave upon wave of enemies until you die. Booby trap choke points and keep moving position to stay alive.



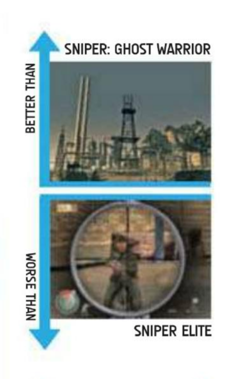
Above: Tagging enemies for them to appear on your map and be highlighted on your sniper scope can form a critical part of your strategy.



Above: One of the most satisfying moments in the game: sniping a sniper from a huge distance and being rewarded with a kill-cam x-ray never gets boring. The kill-cam will trigger randomly and quite frequently, but never loses its potency.

AN OUTRAGEOUSLY UNREALISTIC TIN-CAN ALLEY OF NAZI-KILLING, BUT NO LESS FUN TO PLAY FOR IT





FAQs

Q. WHY ONLY CO-OP?
Does it really make sense to have dozens of snipers on a map, refusing to break cover?

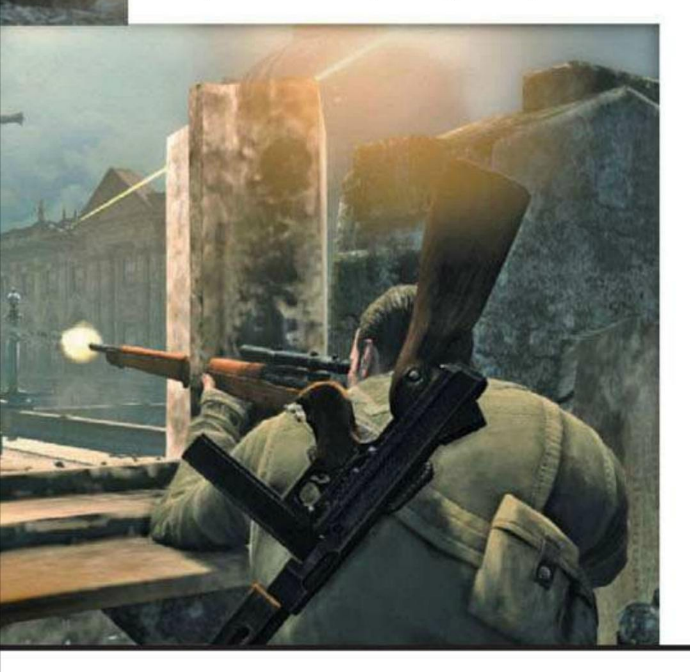
Q. CAN I KILL HITLER?
Via a pre-order bonus, though we suspect the DLC will be available in the near future.

Q. THIS REALLY HAPPENED?
No, of course it didn't. This is more *Inglorious Basterds* than *Downfall*, which some players will find both disappointing and inappropriate.

HITTING HITLER

This is 1945 in Nazi Germany, so it would be remiss of Rebellion not to offer us the chance to shoot the architect of World War II, Adolf Hitler himself. The last year of the war saw the Nazi tide ebb and the Allies could see the end in sight, but Hitler wasn't about to roll over and give up. So they hatched a plan to end it early…

As an exclusive pre-order bonus, Assassinate The Fuhrer gives players the chance to shoot the leader of the Third Reich as he returns from Berchtesgaden to Berlin on his private train. You have one bullet and a small window of opportunity to end the war right there and then, though any potential joy to be taken in succeeding can only be diluted by even the most cursory knowledge of history.



no cheating the system here, and though it is possible to gung-ho your way to victory, the rewards are much greater if you remain below the radar and keep your enemies a sniper's scope away. And, naturally, it's a much more interesting way to play too.

There are a variety of tools available to you once you've chosen and stolen your way to a sniping spot. Played properly, you'll often find yourself in a position that guards won't stumble upon, and which gives you a panoramic view of the area. This is a good opportunity to hold R3 and bring your binoculars up, tagging targets with red chevrons for you to pick off with your sniper rifle. Reeling a shot off will raise their alert status, making them much harder to hit, but there are ways around that: if another loud noise sounds, indicated by an animated loudspeaker icon in the top-right of the screen, then it will disguise the report of your gun. There's no way to prevent another enemy from finding the corpse (short of shooting him, of course) but timing your sniping to a loudspeaker or a rocket engine can buy you more time to remain sniping from your covered position.

The kill cam is the single biggest reason to stick with your sniper rifle though. With delicious frequency, kill shots are rewarded with a bullet-time execution similar to those in *Fallout 3* or *Skyrim*, but even tastier. As soon as you pull the trigger for the killing shot, the camera pans around to follow the bullet in profile as it makes its way into the target's body, whether that's the head, torso, a limb or even the crotch. Rebellion seems to relish a shot to the family jewels in particular, while head shots carry a gruesome satisfaction, as the bullet is X-rayed passing through the skull, macerating bone and ejecting brain matter from the exit wound as it goes. You'll also be rewarded accordingly for long-distance executions or particularly sexy shots, like exploding the grenade on a soldier or shooting two enemies with the same bullet.

From a distance the AI holds up to scrutiny, with enemies reacting and seeking you out once they have a bearing on your position. But things break down when the battle closes in, which it inevitably will. Soldiers will inexplicably try to shoot at you through walls or, worse, attempt to scramble to inaccessible positions. They seem to get particularly attached to their fixed machine-gun posts too, to the point that they would rather die than let go of the gun so that they can turn to face the enemy they were shooting at just a few seconds beforehand. It's a bit of a shoddy finish that doesn't marry up to the realistic bullet physics of the hardest setting, but this is still a sniper's Mecca, perfect for those that like to do their shooting from as far away as possible.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

SPOT THE SHOT: Online co-operative play includes individual challenge missions that involve a spotter, who picks the targets out and tags them for whoever plays as the sniper.

VERDICT 7/10
GIVE IT A SHOT

BECAUSE ARGONAUTS ARE SO BC...

Awesomenauts

Below: Misuse weapons and abilities and the cooldown times will often be the death of you. There's a lot to juggle but getting it right is actually pretty rewarding.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: dtp Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Ronimo Games
PRICE: 800 MSP
RELEASE: 2 May
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

The year is 3587. David Cameron's robotic reincarnation has been installed as Prime Minister of the Reunited Kingdom. The war was long, but nothing compared to the perils of galactic combat. In space, armies battle for essential resources and power. At the conflict's core, hired mercenaries clash endlessly, aiming to soak up the glorious spoils of victory.

With such riches at stake, who'd have thought the task at hand would be so simple? *Awesomenauts* pits two teams against each other in tightly-constructed arenas. Each area streamlines encounters towards three key locations. Most take place on a high road, low path, or in the middle of no man's land. Both teams must destroy turrets before laying siege to the enemy's base, which plays host to the much-desired energy supply. Blow up the other team's drill core and the game is over.

While three-on-three combat may seem limited, the reality is very different; having six human-controlled opponents ensures a tactical outlook that is deceptively deep. Faceless droids and bots aid your cause, but they're nothing more than cannon fodder to be sacrificed for the greater good. With such gorgeously crisp visuals and a catchy soundtrack, the continued death of your minions doesn't live long in the memory.

Most importantly, this game proves space cowboys exist. Backed up by hip-hop-loving frogs, lumbering robots and jet-pack-riding monkeys, the six characters on offer are excellently crafted. Once the initial feeling of craziness subsides, it becomes clear that each mercenary has specific talents, most of which never quite work without the assistance of others. Instead, *Awesomenauts* forces strategy and persistence.

Each class is balanced fairly well. Many will prefer to assault the opposition's base, but plenty of other roles need to be played. You start the game with two abilities, and have the opportunity to introduce two more throughout play. All four can be upgraded, offering improvements that always make a big difference.

For instance, the cowboy is barely a threat upon first starting, but throw in the ability to lob multiple sticks of dynamite and the power soon begins to shift. If explosives aren't aiding your cause, summoning the strength of an angry bull should do the trick. Chameleons strike from invisible positions, aliens heal injured comrades, and clunky androids bite the life out of hostile forces. As lone threats, each is weak. Bring their skills together, and you can execute an unstoppable game plan.

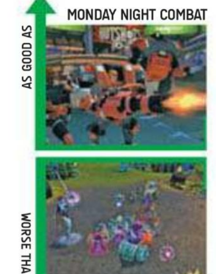
Before the promise of DLC materialises, *Awesomenauts* suffers from a lack of ambition. Extra characters are needed, although any further expense isn't welcome. Arenas are well-designed but never quite excel. Certain locations may have you escaping the grasp of a giant worm, or battling low gravity, but for the most part environmental threat is non-existent. More of this would only add to the carnage, throwing a spanner in gameplay that can become regimented after a few hours' play.

Despite this, *Awesomenauts* is another success for 2012's downloadable scene. Ronimo has produced a thoroughly engaging title that easily satisfies any superficial desires. We were left wanting more, and eagerly considering the potential of a fleshed out sequel. Right now, *Prettydecentnauts* is a more fitting title.

MISSING LINK

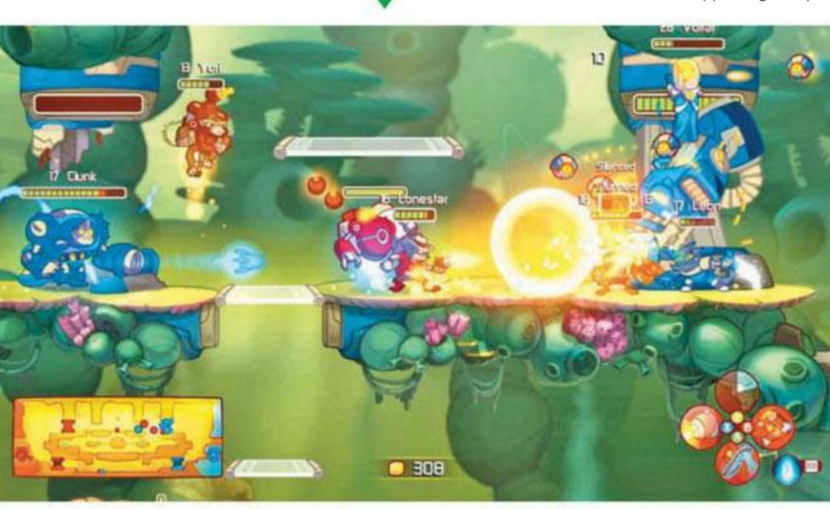
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHY IS HE JUST STANDING THERE?: Introducing more objectives would help each player gain even greater worth throughout a match. Simple things, but we all need to feel loved.





BRIEFLY FUN, BUT NEEDS MORE VARIATION





Above: Don't be deceived by the platform look and feel – *Awesomenauts* has more in common with competitive arena-based battles like *DOTA* and *League Of Legends*.

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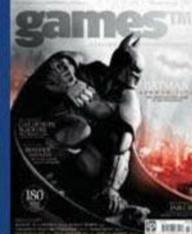


















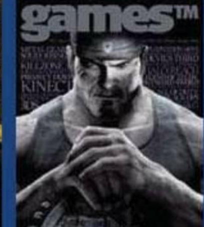


























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Below: Successfully navigating a loop-de-loop feels like an achievement in itself. Oftentimes, your car will just drop from the air or fly off into the distance, before plummeting to its demise.





WHERE'S THE FUN BUTTON?

Ridge Racer Unbounded

One of the biggest issues with *Unbounded*'s assortment of single-player events (and they were numerous) was that the AI felt too prescribed. Rival racers rarely diverted from the beaten track and almost never took advantage of the various hidden pathways and shortcuts lying on the periphery. Therefore, with some human knuckles behind the virtual wheel, chaos reigns throughout *Unbounded*'s less-than graceful online mode.

While it's a struggle to find a full starting line-up of eight rivals, heading online has every potential to represent the game at its most gloriously unhinged - a carnage-fuelled rampage of crashes, environmental destruction and canny tricks supplied in high abundance. However, it's marred by dire issues of pace, with even the gentlest of prods from behind negating any and all success; cars spiral off the track costing valuable seconds, stressing the importance of navigating courses perfectly to secure a clean win.

So it's less a question of skill and more of luck; as long as you don't succumb to an unexpected prang and can differentiate between the destructible (read: polystyrene) objects and those made of immovable material then it should be plain sailing to the finish line. The results belie the game's arcade heritage – it's too po-faced with its physics to make races scintillating – performing at best as a perfunctory online racer.

Bugbear's gaze is clearly drawn to the track editor. The create-the-whole-game concept packed with every track piece featured in the single-player game (along with some ramps and loop-de-loops for good measure) can all be crudely wedged together and uploaded online for all to play. The community has clearly gone nuts with the idea, with tracks that support multiple pathways (by which we mean a high road and a low road) and physics-defying sections that should inspire giddy enthusiasm, but only serve to dumfound as heavy physics chew-up and spit out any adventurous design spirit. As admirable and capable as the community has proven to be, the fact of the matter is that the gameplay is simply too uncompromising to support a wild imagination.

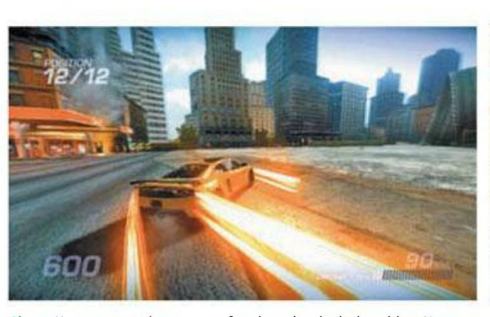
So, at its core, it's the most basic of online competitive racing games. There are a few modes cribbed from single-player and there's no shortage of new tracks to play, but with a lack of satisfactory progression and zero tolerance for in-car fun, it fails to perform as either a straight racer or a histrionic-laden multiplayer jam. The community spirit is encouraging for the game's future, but their time and efforts are better invested elsewhere.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Bugbear Entertainment
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 2-8

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

IMAGINATIONLAND: Multiplayer is divided into two primary modes that split map rotations between single-player and user-generated maps. A mix of the two would have been welcome.

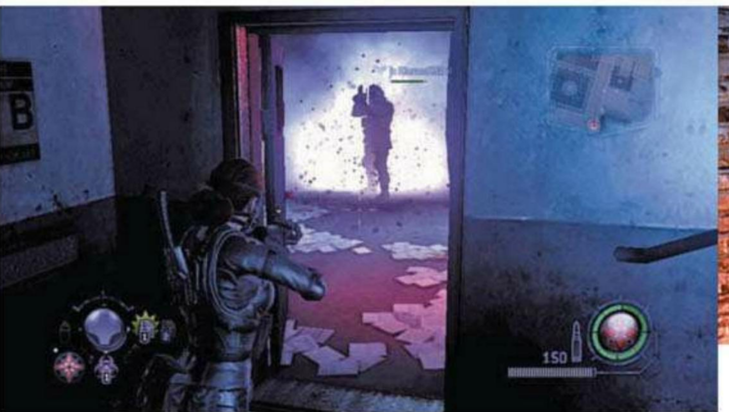




Above: User-generated maps are often ingeniously designed but AI opponents are clueless to the layout on more complex tracks, often crashing into walls on the simplest of bends.



VERDICT 5/10
DEPRESSINGLY MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD



Left: The stun loop in full effect – we cornered Ada in a back alley and went to town on her, abusing the weak-ass melee attack and its broken stun animation until she died. Absolute rubbish.

A GENUINE GAMING VIRUS

Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Slant Six
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 2-8

***Operation Raccoon City* is no more a *Resident Evil* game than *Tom Clancy's H.A.W.X.* is a JRPG.** It might feature a couple of familiar faces and the odd location recognisable from the PSone games but that's as deep as the ties run. If *Battlefield*'s online war bites are an online gamer's delicious cup of tea, *ORC* is the gaming equivalent of a mug of boiling water that has had the word 'teabag' whispered into it a couple of times – it's unsatisfying, poorly made and likely to scald anyone foolish enough to touch it.

When faced with *Operation Raccoon City*'s laughable AI in the solo game, the logical assumption was that the game would be far better with co-op buddies. And while that's true to an extent, it's a constant that applies to just about every game – as a rule, co-op just makes things better. It *is* better with friends, then, but not by much. Enemy AI and mission layout in the Campaign hit the same potholes as in solo mode, and unless you're teamed with players that know the mission in question, there'll be times when you'll wish for the braindead AI instead. The concept of allies becoming infected and turning into zombies (who must then turn on the team) is an interesting one, but it's made utterly worthless by the fact that, when killed in zombie form, a player can be instantly revived, all happy and human and with all their ammo back. The game may ask you to turn on your team, but the best thing to do is simply surrender your mutated body to speed everything along.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THREE-WAY: Special Forces face off against Umbrella's finest in the team-based versus modes, but the shambling zombie horde doesn't care whose brain cells it chows down on.

Versus play is far more hit and miss, with four team-based modes of varying quality laid out to tempt players into wasting their time here rather than working through the rubbish parallel universe story. All the staples are there – the team deathmatch mode, the capture/hold mode and the survival mode – and in fairness, each is made more interesting by the neutral yet malevolent third faction in the numerous zombies peppered around the map. They're rubbish, yes, and the bloodlust mechanic doesn't even function on any kind of strategic level, but it's the one half-decent selling point *ORC* has – and by God, it's going to flaunt it.

Riddled with stupid issues that plague many online shooters – such as the wildly unbalanced classes and levelling perks that leave newcomers at a severe disadvantage – and a few of its own home-brewed cracks (like the fact that opponents can be locked into endless melee loops) *Operation Raccoon City* is a mess. It's fair to say that it's better online than off, but that's still far from a recommendation unless you're actively looking for a reason to hate *Resident Evil*.

VERDICT 3/10
MAKES OUTBREAK LOOK LIKE A MASTERPIECE



Above: Heroes mode puts you in the shoes of several series favourites, but once you die you'll respawn as a rubbish grunt instead. Also, the lack of Barry Burton is saddening indeed. DLC? Probably.



"This is how you tell a story through a videogame, this is how you set the mood"

BILL GARDNER, IRRATIONAL GAMES



WHY I ♥…

Super Metroid

BILL GARDNER
IRRATIONAL GAMES

“I LOVE Super Metroid in particular because of the amount of mood and atmosphere they were able to put into a 16-bit game that still holds up today. You walk into the first base and you've got that desolate ‘What happened here?’ feeling. A lot of that for me was very formative – it was like, this is how you tell a story through a videogame, this is how you set the mood, from just walking through that completely empty base.

When you come across the room where they experiment on the Metroids, and seeing that's it broken out, you know exactly what happened there. Or coming into that room where you first meet Ridley…

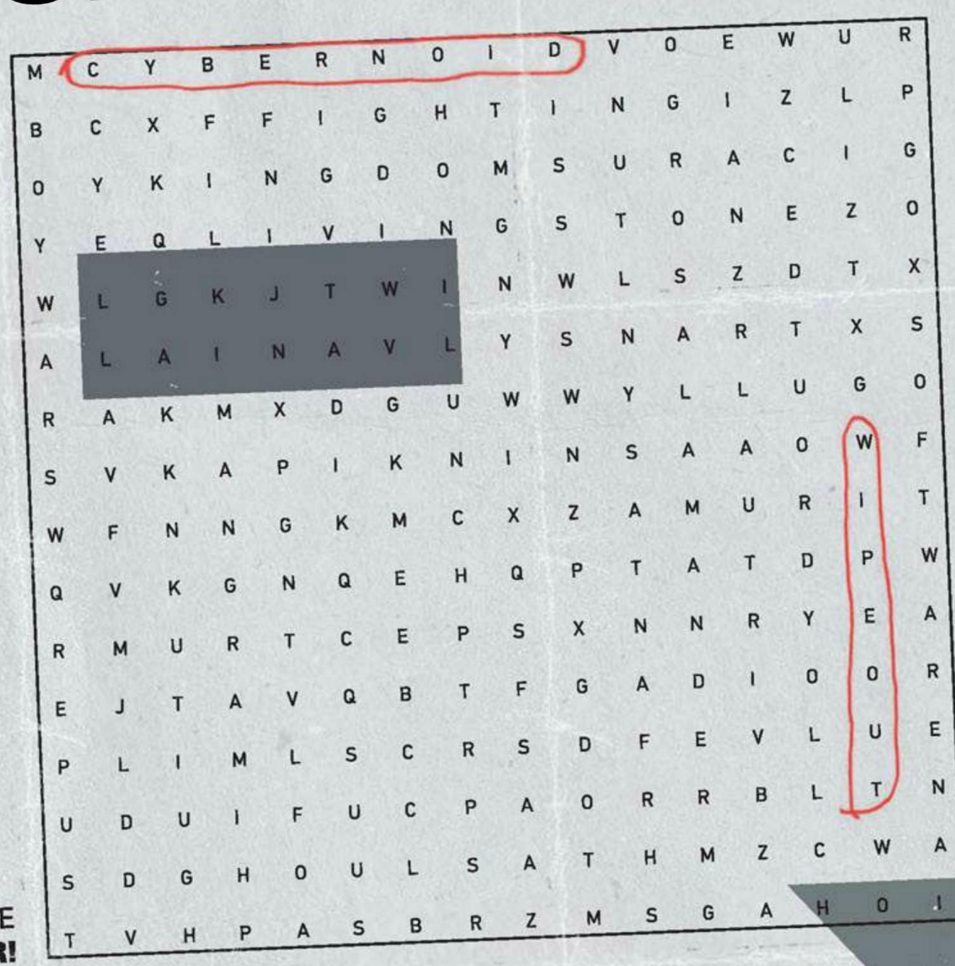
Metroid mixes a phenomenal mood with an open world, and all kinds of ways to introduce new skills. It's absolutely pitch-perfect… I'd love to go on forever about it.”

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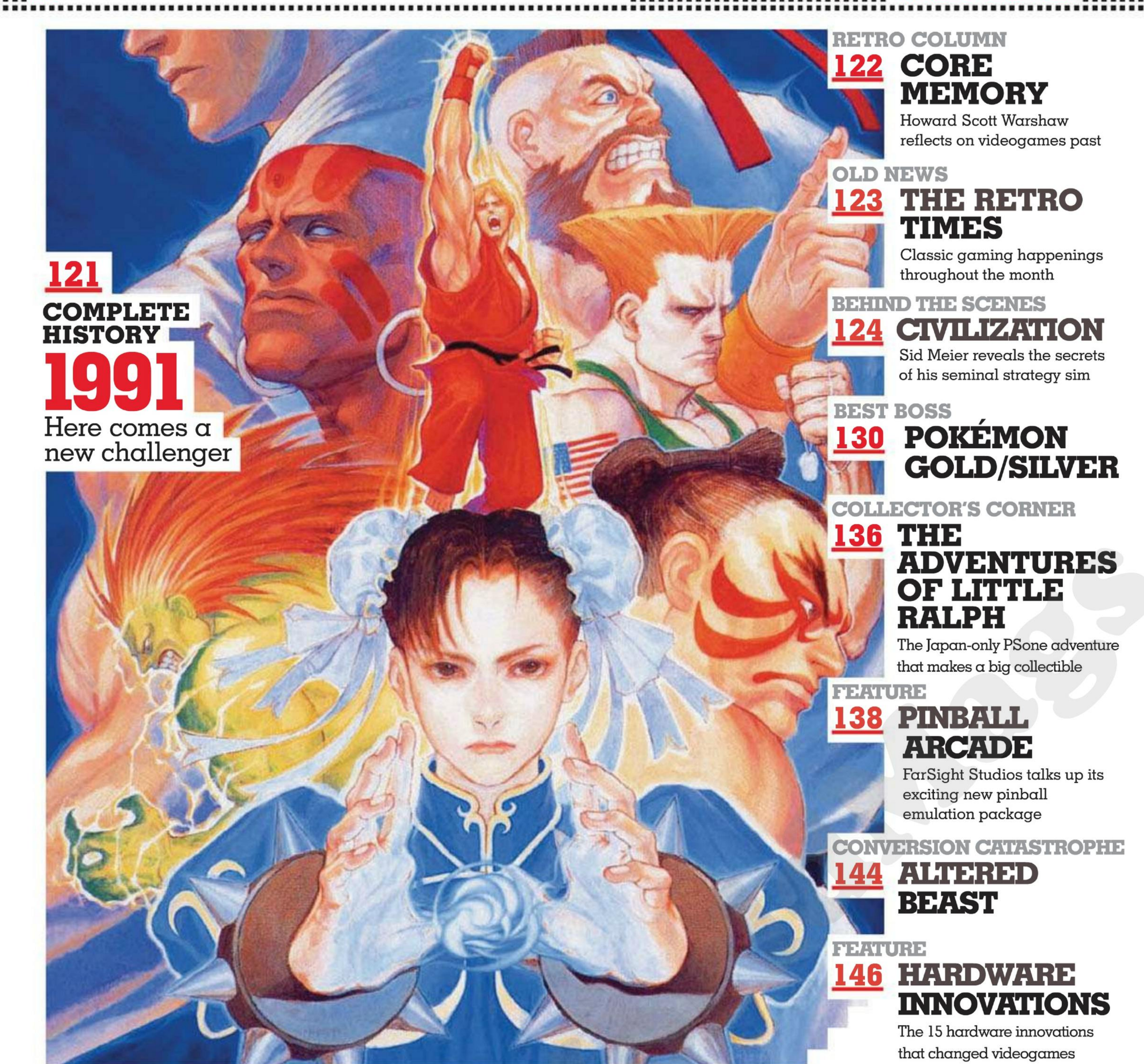
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CORE MEMORY

ANECDOTES AND REFLECTIONS FROM ATARI VETERAN AND E.T. CODER HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW…





WAY BACK IN '83, Atari was dying. Now at age 83, Jack Tramiel has died. Do you know Jack?

Jack was the guy who made Commodore Computers a multinational powerhouse. Jack was the man who took over Atari Consumer and Home divisions in '84 when they were struggling for survival. The rumours I heard indicated he picked them up by simply assuming their debt (around $220 million, give or take). Then he purportedly defaulted on the debt, which improved his financial situation substantially. Next he started laying people off, which further improved his finances. We went from 2,000 people down to 200 in a few weeks. I was one of the 200 because I interviewed with Jack. Then he started selling anything and everything around to raise some operating capital. Jack got right down to business because that's what Jack was all about. Business.

Jack was also an immigrant. From whence did he come? A Nazi concentration camp, where he was held during his early teens. He lost both his parents there. I suspect Jack learned a lot of things during this time, most notably: survival! Who better to rescue Atari's floundering divisions?

Rumour and speculation followed Jack everywhere. Was he a businessman? A technological innovator? A cutthroat competitor? There were many stories but little verification. Man of mystery. Man of intrigue.

My interview with him was a memorable moment indeed. When Jack took over the Home Games division (including me), it was instantly clear not everyone there was going to remain there. Jack personally interviewed each of the game engineers. When my turn came it was instantly clear to me that, until this moment, I hadn't known Jack.

We chatted about my work (past and present) and how things might be in the future. Jack had a clear vision for game development; it wasn't business as usual like we were used to. Not at all. Jack's proposal made it crystal clear he was much more interested in us supporting him than in him supporting us. This was a considerable comedown from what we were used to. Of course, the company who'd gotten us used to that had just given us away to Jack, so most of our bubbles were already popped. Unwelcome news to be sure, but not exactly shocking either.

What *was* shocking was where the interview went next. Jack enquires as to my marital status. I tell him I am married and in point of fact my good lady wife is a current employee of Atari, and I put in the good word for her. Then Jack gives me a quizzically indecipherable look. I'm trying to figure out if he doesn't understand what I'm saying or it's not quite computing for him or maybe he ate some bad pastrami for lunch. Hard to say.

"Your wife works?" he asks. I say yes, that this is fairly typical in Silicon Valley these days, and I add that I support her career aspirations. Jack looks at me like I'm an idiot and schools me on the institution of marriage thusly: "Your wife shouldn't work! Your wife should be at home, greeting you at the door with your slippers and newspaper." I nearly lost my slippers right there. Really, Jack?!? How unprofessional, I thought. How archaic. How unenlightened!

Then it occurred to me, this man was my new boss. I give any concentration camp survivor a lot of room, and Jack was no exception. To survive what he survived and to achieve what he achieved is truly awe-inspiring. Sitting with Jack, it was easy to see there wasn't an ounce of pretence or bullshit in him. I quickly came to respect Jack enormously, and just as quickly I realised this was no longer my Atari. This was Jack's place now. Jack's rules. Jack's priorities. Shortly thereafter I gave final notice and took leave of this most amazing chapter in my life.

Jack was an incredible man who left a remarkable legacy to so many people. But to me, Jack was all about the slippers. Godspeed, Jack.

"Rumour and speculation followed Jack everywhere. Was he a businessman? Technological innovator? Cutthroat competitor?"

RETRO TIMES

10 FIND NEWS
20 PRINT NEWS
30 GOTO 10

■ The Android mobile platform's best Mega Drive emulator, MD.emu, has been updated to offer Mega CD support. *Snatcher*, *Road Avenger* or even *Switch Panic* can now be played on the bus.

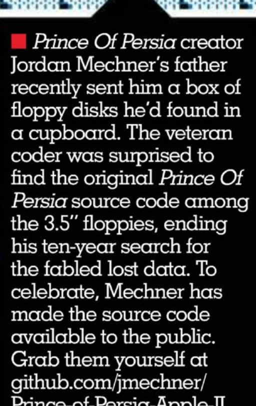


■ Artistic venture or way to make easy money? You decide at 72Pins.com. For $16, you'll receive an amazing '8-bit' version of a videogame favourite, which in reality is a relabeled old NES cart.



■ Three Looking Glass Studios N64 prototypes have surfaced. They include river racer *Wildwaters Extreme Kayak*, *Micro Machines*-alike *Mini Racers*, and unfinished rally game *Tamiya Racing*.





■ Square Enix has made much of its musical back catalogue available as a Spotify-style audio stream at music.square-enix.com/audio. It's a good alternative to crappy pop, and free of charge too.



■ Despite Square Enix shutting down previous fan projects, *Chrono Trigger HD* has surfaced. Currently no more than a Reddit thread and a title screen, it's nonetheless getting the community hyped.





■ *Prince Of Persia* creator Jordan Mechner's father recently sent him a box of floppy disks he'd found in a cupboard. The veteran coder was surprised to find the original *Prince Of Persia* source code among the 3.5" floppies, ending his ten-year search for the fabled lost data. To celebrate, Mechner has made the source code available to the public. Grab them yourself at github.com/jmechner/Prince-of-Persia-Apple-II.



■ Though the semi-finalists will have been announced by the time you read this, there's still time to enjoy the unfolding action of Atari's competition to find a *Pong* reboot for iOS. The grand prize is $100,000.

■ KRIKzz has unleashed the Mega Drive fan's holy grail; a cart that supports save states, with space for 32GB of flash memory, Master System support and even a save function for Mega CD and 32X.



■ An eBayer in France is flogging a complete collection of Game & Watches for £16,000. With no end date at the time of writing, you might be able to place an offer here: tinyurl.com/c84hm9z



Remake Of The Month

Sonic The Hedgehog 2

■ Indies just love treading on Sega's toes, and just like the HD *Sonic* demo that turned up around the release of *Sonic 4 Episode I* last year, this effort surfaced weeks before *Episode 2* launched. At present only a redux of the Emerald Hill Zone, it's nonetheless an excellent demonstration of the team's commitment to authenticity, the precise physics and vibrant graphic design all replicated to a high standard. It just needs Tails snapping at Sonic's heels throughout the levels to be spot on. Download it at s2hd.com, but be aware the game is still suspected to contain keylogging software that's driving antivirus software a little loopy.



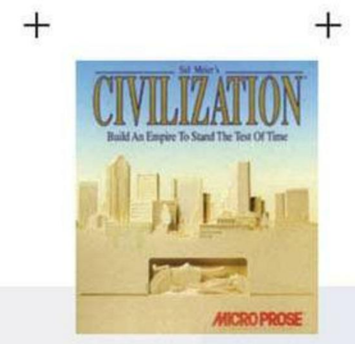




BEHIND THE SCENES

CIVILIZATION

In 1991, Sid Meier managed to squeeze the whole of planet Earth's military, political and social history into the space of four floppy disks. games™ catches up with the Firaxis CEO to discuss the making, and legacy, of his classic turn-based strategy sim



Title: Civilization
Released: 1991
Format: PC
Publisher: Microprose
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Sid Meier,
Bruce Shelley
(Game Design)
Michael Haire,
Harry Teasley,
Barbara Bents,
Todd Brizzi
(Graphics)
Jeffery L. Briggs
(Music)
Ken Lagace,
Jim McConkey
(Sound)
Bruce Shelley
(Documentation)

IT'S FITTING THAT, like the expanding empires of its game world, *Sid Meier's Civilization* had exceedingly humble origins. As the nascent predecessors of his players' space-faring rulers shuddered in prehistoric caves, so Meier sat in a tiny office sowing the seeds for his history-spanning epic almost entirely alone, with only rudimentary tools.

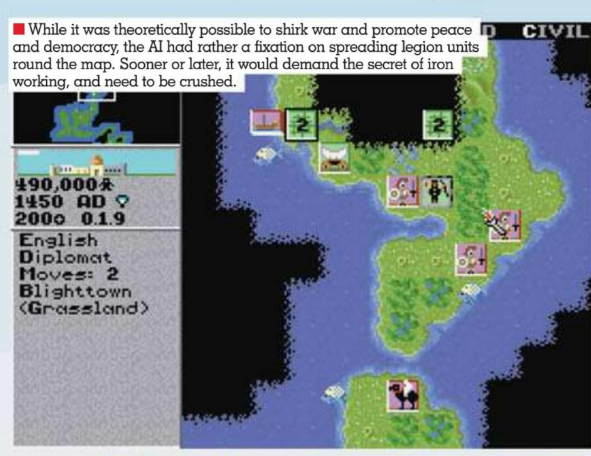
"At the beginning there were two of us," laughs Meier. "I did the programming, and in those days I did the art as well, and maybe even the sound effects, I don't know – we had a very limited palette of sound in those days. So I built it, basically, for the first number of months, and Bruce Shelley was my producer, kind of my alter-ego, the guy who would play the game and say, 'Sid, this is kinda cool, but I don't like this, and why don't you do this?' So we'd kind of collaborate design-wise and talk things over. It was the two of us for quite some time.

"And then it kind of turned the corner and we said, 'Okay, this is fun; this could be a cool game. Look – actually we now have 256 colours! So we probably should bring a real artist in here to work on this game.'"

At this point, *Civilization*'s team expanded to between seven and ten people depending on creative need at the time. "But I think in the 16-colour version, that's still my artwork," Meier reveals. "With limited resources, you kind of focus on what's really important, and I think that's what we were able to do there."

There's been an element of controversy, however, concerning the origins of some of these resources. Past media coverage on Meier's early work has alleged that a 1980 British board game, which concerned building a nation's fortunes from scratch in prehistory, and was even titled Civilization, provided the main basis for the game.

"It had a lot of interesting board game mechanics, but not too many that translated directly continued>.



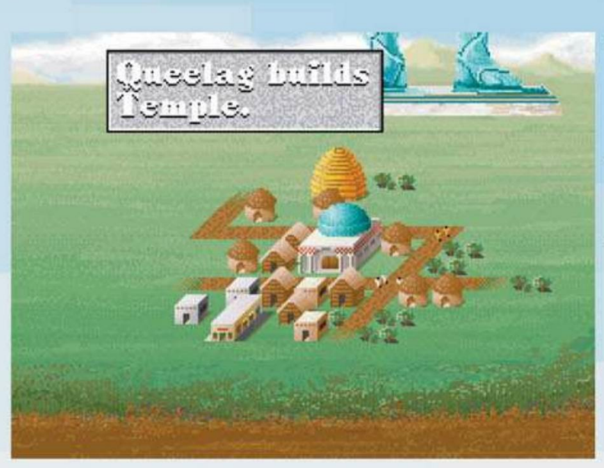
While it was theoretically possible to shirk war and promote peace and democracy, the AI had rather a fixation on spreading legion units round the map. Sooner or later, it would demand the secret of iron working, and need to be crushed.





WITH LIMITED RESOURCES, YOU FOCUS ON WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT









FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
RICHMAN

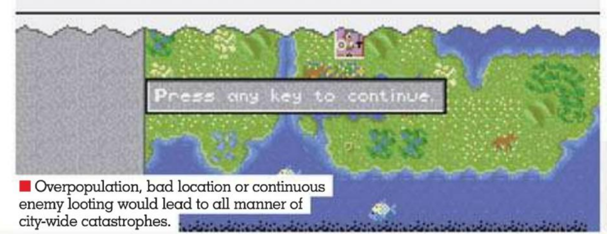
What a fantastic game that was. I had it on Amiga and I remember many an hour lost to it. I remember when I found out you could change a citizen to be a scientist, taxman or entertainer – suddenly no need to rush buy temples and colosseums to make the populous happy. Almost always took the scientific route to finish but only after annihilating the others down to a single city. I loved how there was always a rush to develop enough scientific discoveries to get to the next big military unit that would outclass all that had come before. In particular, if you discovered tanks before the rest you could just get a small number of them and tear around the map in a blitzkrieg, taking all the other cities. Then once all was in order, retooling all my cities to be scientific centres and building the largest spaceship possible. Good times.

Posted by:
POPERAMONE

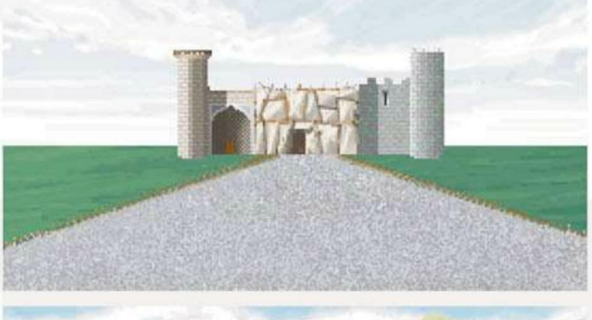
For me it was the sublime *Civ Rev* that gabbed me first. I got home from work, grabbed some bread and butter and sat trying to get the final cultural victory to win an achievement. I played till I began to drop the controller and still set my alarm an hour early to get up and finish the game. It was one of the games that drew me back into PC gaming. *Civ 5* is still one of my most played games; I even invested some time into the Facebook version.

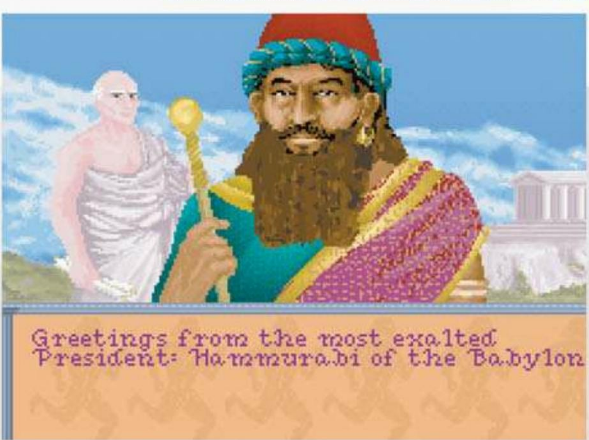
Posted by:
BILGE RAT

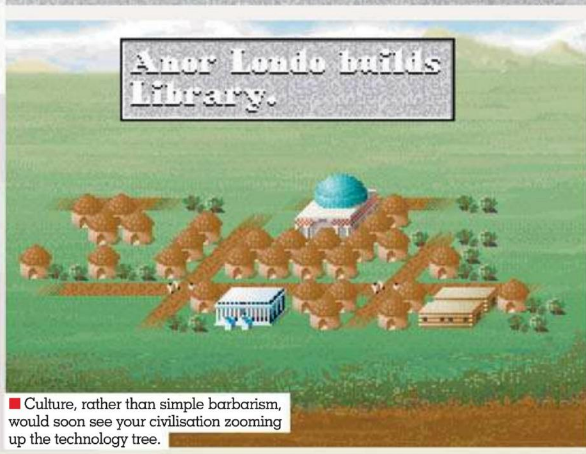
I played *Alpha Centauri* and I think that is where the series hit its peak. I can't imagine going back now and having to play a game with no mind worms, no mag tubes and no solipsistic brains in tanks.



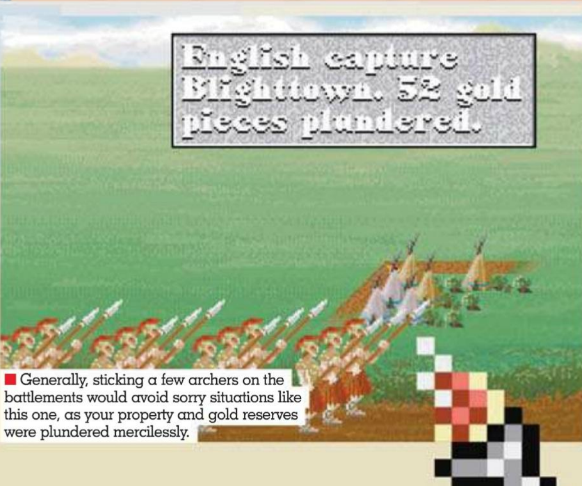
Overpopulation, bad location or continuous enemy looting would lead to all manner of city-wide catastrophes.







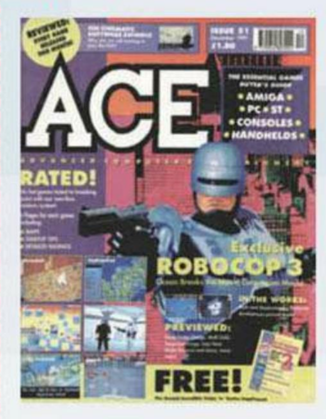
Culture, rather than simple barbarism, would soon see your civilisation zooming up the technology tree.



Generally, sticking a few archers on the battlements would avoid sorry situations like this one, as your property and gold reserves were plundered mercilessly.







Ultimately, what Civilization represents is a sizeable step forward for the strategy genre, by showing just how much is possible with a game of this type.

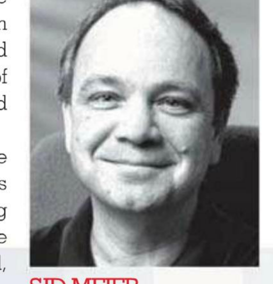
ACE Issue 51

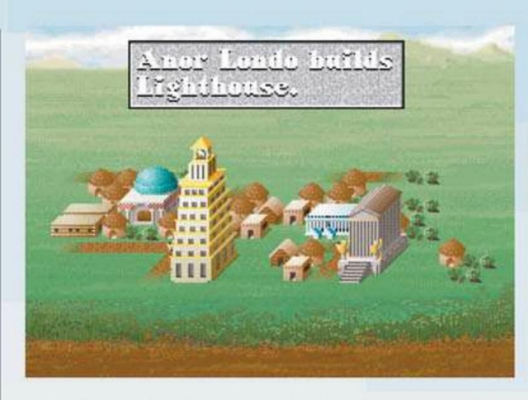
to what would work on the computer," says Meier, determined to set the record straight. "But it might just have planted the seed of, 'Hey, could we make a game about civilisation? Wouldn't this be cool?' And I think the other influence was *SimCity*. It was shortly after *SimCity* came out, and that was probably one of those games that kind of got a lot of designers' attention in the way that you grew something from a small seed to something of your own creation. I think that was part of the appeal. You knew that your city, or your civilisation, or your path through the game was going to be different than anybody else's, and even if you played the next time, it was going to be new. So there's something very appealing about the way these building games evolved and told a brand new story each time you played. *SimCity* and *Railroad Tycoon* had that kind of quality, and we wanted to really build on that with *Civilization*.

"So we kind of liked the idea of a construction game, a building game, that type of thing. I'd been playing another game called *Empire* which was a little bit like *Risk* on the computer, and had a little bit of that exploring and conquering the world feeling to it, and so we were looking for a way to maybe build on some of the ideas that we'd explored with *Railroad Tycoon* and the idea of a 'conquer the world' game to be kind of fun."

It was a while into development before *Civilization* actually hit its mark in terms of its classic turn-based, multitasking societal management dynamic. The original idea was a different one indeed, as Meier explains.

"The first pass at *Civilization* was actually more of a real-time game," he reveals. "More like *SimCity*, where you had a world and you zoned, say, this area for agriculture, and this area for building, but there was a lot of watching, and not a lot of playing. So we switched it over after a couple of months to what it eventually ended up – turn-based, moving things actually physically around and being a lot more hands-on, having a lot more things to do. And that turned out to be, I think, one of the key aspects of the game that drew you in and gave you this investment which you were making because you'd really had a hand in every decision that you made along the way."


SID MEIER
Game Designer

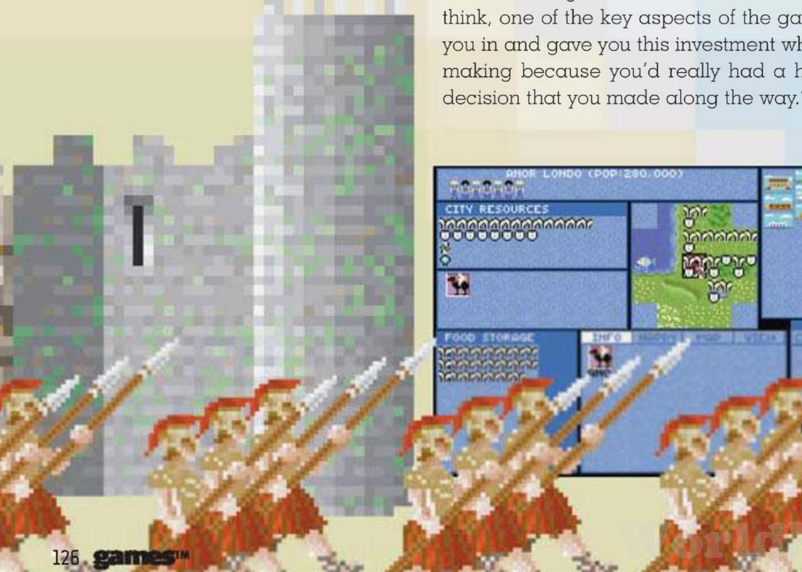


Perhaps the lynchpin of this decision-making process for the player was the now-stalwart notion of the technology tree. While it could easily have been a eureka moment ('Micropose wise men discover the secret of Tech Tree!'), Meier describes the idea as more of a gradual evolution of concepts that fitted the mood of development.

"I wish I remembered the moment when it happened," muses Meier. "At that time, I had these two books that were like 'The History Of Civilization In A Nutshell' or 'Civilization For Idiots', you know? Those kind of books. And a lot of times one of the greatest resources for games is children's books about pirates, or railroads, or whatever. There's a lot of visual kind of stuff that is cool to look at, and also boils things down to the fundamentals, and probably things that most people know.

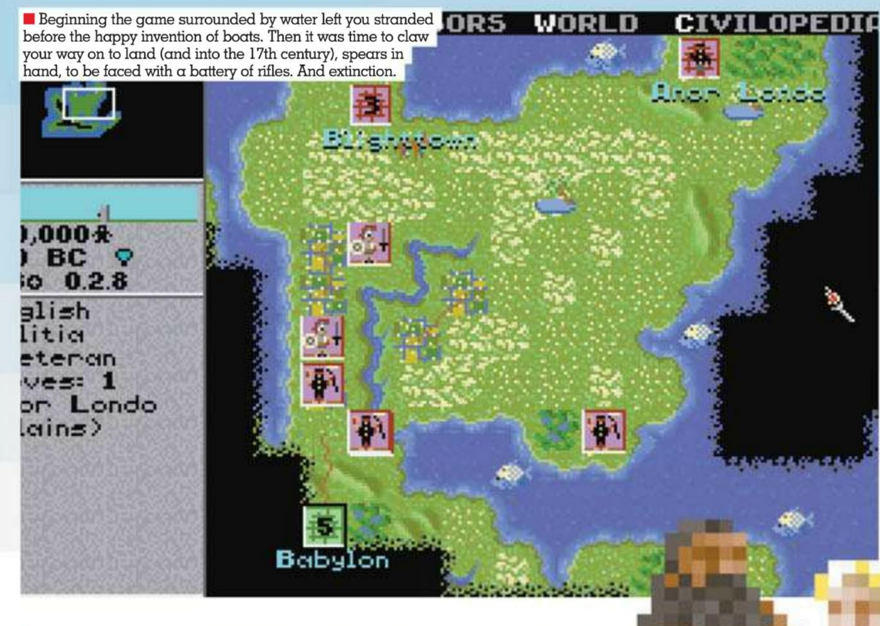
"So I was going through these books, the kind of timelines of history, things like that, and one of the tracks was technology – what are the scientific inventions of *this* era, or *this* period? – and that probably led pretty naturally to the idea of a tech tree. I think our innovation was to make it not linear, but to make it branching, and give you choices. But that's kind of what we always try and do in a game, is give you interesting choices to make."

"It really gave the game a sense of progress and a variety of paths, and it allowed us to slowly unlock different aspects of the game. And I think that was one of the things that made it successful – it was very easy to start playing with a very simple set of









■ Beginning the game surrounded by water left you stranded before the happy invention of boats. Then it was time to claw your way on to land (and into the 17th century), spears in hand, to be faced with a battery of rifles. And extinction.

FEUDALISM
Civilization Advance

In the unsettled times that followed the collapse of Charlemagne's Frankish empire, a new social and political system arose in Europe, called FEUDALISM. Derived from the concept of MONARCHY, it was a hierarchial system where each succeeding stratum owed allegiance to those above. At the bottom were the serfs, who worked the land for the lord of the local manor. The local lord in turn managed the land for the lord above him, and so on to the king, who actually owned all the land. The people at the bottom of the hierarchy were protected by those above, and in return served their masters. FEUDALISM led to the code of CHIVALRY and the mounted Knight.

THE FIRST PASS AT CIVILIZATION WAS ACTUALLY MORE OF A REAL-TIME GAME

decisions, and gradually more and more things kind of unfolded and opened up, and before you knew it you were halfway through the game."

While it was designed to massively vary the scope of players' approach to navigating a civilisation's pathway to power, Meier admits the sheer possibility of the tech tree outweighed any of his team's estimations when it reached the wild on release. "We didn't anticipate a lot of the reaction to *Civilization*," he smiles. "We kind of played it straight, we went down the normal path and then we found, as people played, all these different things that they discovered. The chariot strategy of just building chariots and riding roughshod over the world, or building lots and lots of little cities. It was really eye-opening how people explored all these different ways of playing and [for example] how you can gain the tech tree and get to gunpowder as fast as possible, or whatever. So, that actually influenced some of our later [*Civilization* series] designs. We realised that we needed to test out all these bizarre paths and all these different possibilities; we were really intrigued to find out all these different ways of playing. You know, 'Can I play without ever going to war?' or whatever. It was kind of a sandbox for a lot of people. And that was something we actually exploited in *Civ II* by opening up the rules and giving a lot more modding opportunities and things like that. We realised people didn't just want to play – they wanted to explore, and almost kind of be designers on their own. And that has led to a lot of the modding capabilities that were built into the later versions of *Civilization*."

■■■ IT'S HARD TO believe, but the tech tree concept was, at one stage, even more complex, too; Meier originally didn't want to stop at just one. *Civilization* was at one point to have a tech tree *of tech trees*, linking whole branches of advancements into other, even greater branches of cultural technology. "We had a huge map that we started with," he remembers, "Which we continued>.

Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition

■ Three years after *Civ*, no sequel had yet appeared. "Primarily because we had exhausted ideas as far as a *Civilization* game, and we had put all the ideas we could think of into that game," says Meier. "And had we done *Civilization II* at that time, it would have looked at lot like *Civilization*. We didn't have a bunch of new ideas."

Micropose's Brian Reynolds instead came up with a concept that was similar, but focused specifically on the 1492 – 1850 colonial period. "It was a really cool game. I think he looked at what was going on in *Civilization* in terms of turn-based and other ideas, and it was an interest of his, in any case, this period of history, and this kind of approach to a specific time," says Meier.

"It all worked out well, because by the time he'd done that, he had some specific thoughts about *Civilization II*, and what it could be to make it worthwhile and make it a new game. I think people saw the progress both in terms of the technology and the gameplay ideas."



eventually found that – by making it smaller – the game was both a lot more manageable and playable."

Besides playability, there was another reason to keep things comparatively smaller and focussed. MS DOS-based PCs of the era were subject to some pretty arcane memory restrictions, limiting anything that ran through DOS to a maximum operating space of 640k. As *Civ* was spanning a gargantuan eight floppy disks, it was clearly going to be a big game. Clever tech solutions were required.

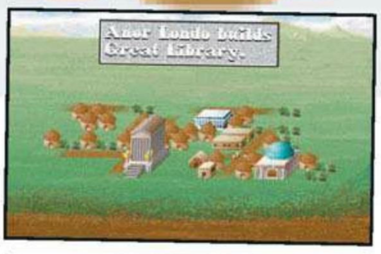
"We discovered what we called overlays," remembers Meier, "We figured out a way to kick some of the code out, and bring some new code in, and that's really why *Civ* is structured as a lot of separate screens – you'll go to a City screen, or you'll go to a Wonder screen, or you'll go to a Tech screen, because we could throw part of the code out, and bring in special code for the city screen, or to look at the tech tree, and actually have code that was a lot more than 640k by using this technology trick that we had figured out."

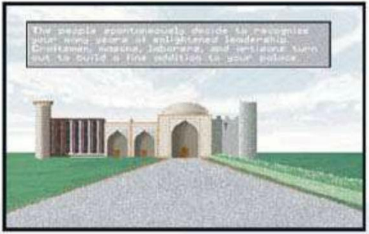
Wondrous technical gymnastics aside, Meier laments that there were still several cuts that had to be made to the game that he'll always consider left *Civilization* slightly short of the original dream. Aside from the basic sound and those self-drawn graphics of Meier's, he's more than aware of the limitations of the AI nations in the game, which took famous liberties with the world's rules. Knocking up an expensive and time-consuming Wonder in seconds, or letting the normally coast-hugging trireme explorer boats cross vast oceans were just some of the computer's dirty tricks. Meier's chief explanation for these history-shattering cheats is fairly straightforward.

"There's a little bit of laziness involved in there," he laughs. "When you're creating the entire history of civilisation on your computer, that's a big job in itself. So we may have taken a couple of little shortcuts with the AI. The Wonders is a good example. They do spend the resources, but they don't wait… they go, 'Oh, I've got enough to build the Pyramids – boom!' So, again it was kind of a revelation to us how much people noticed that. We thought we could get away with that. AI has a hard time looking into the future and figuring it out what it should do ten turns from now. But there were a few shortcuts we took with the AI, both in favour of and sometimes penalising it to create a sequence of difficulty levels."

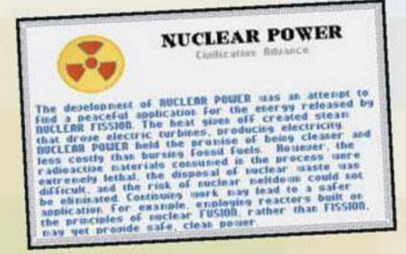
"We really try to craft an experience that is the most fun for the player," says Meier, shifting to the present tense and perhaps hinting at developmental philosophies on Firaxis' upcoming *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. "When we think about how the AI should perform and react and things like that. So it's something we focused a little more time on in the later versions to try and get it together. We thought we could get away with a bit more back then. It was a revelation to us how closely people picked apart and analysed the game. It was gratifying, but in hindsight, had we known that, there's a few things we might have done with a little more care. It was the first time, you know?"

BUT OVERALL, MEIER clearly remains extremely proud of his groundbreaking god game achievement, as he reflects on the legacy it's left behind both in *Civilization*'s own series successors, and on the creative outlook of other developers. "I wish we could say that we'd planned it all that way, and figured it out, but, in hindsight, I think we can see the qualities of the game that really made it have this lifetime to it," Meier reflects. "But they were not things we really designed in there knowing that it





The included Civilopedia enabled you to swot up on all the available technological breakthroughs in the game, in an attempt to chart a unique pathway to global utopia. Or, more likely, explosive, bloody genocide.



WE MAY HAVE TAKEN A COUPLE OF LITTLE SHORTCUTS WITH THE AI



>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Sid Meier's Pirates! > Civilization > Civilization Revolution

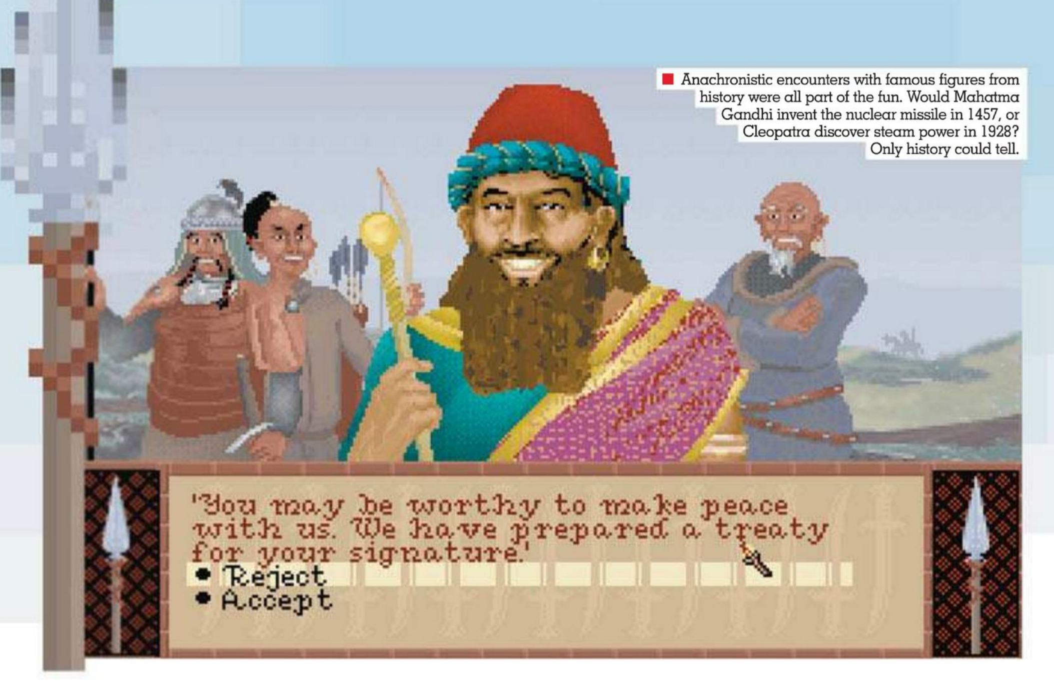


The first Sid Meier-branded product, this 1987 buccaneering sim laid much of the groundwork for *Civ*, but had a far more action-based setup.



A rehash for the modern kids, *Civilization Revolution* was a four-hour long dash through history, with multiple focused 'win' conditions.





■ Anachronistic encounters with famous figures from history were all part of the fun. Would Mahatma Gandhi invent the nuclear missile in 1457, or Cleopatra discover steam power in 1928? Only history could tell.

was going to be a game that, twenty years from now, we would still be playing.

"It was kind of a culmination of our development as designers, and our ideas, so I think in some way we kind of deserved some amount of success, because we'd been working pretty hard through *Railroad Tycoon* and *Pirates!* and games like that to create an open-world experience, and a replayable experience. But looking back on it, I think it had a very accessible topic – if it wasn't something [players] were super interested in, it was at least something they were sort of... intrigued by. 'If I was king, how would I do?' or whatever. So it had a fairly universal topic. The way it started off very accessible and then grew just worked very well for players, and it had the 'one more turn' quality, which is kind of based on having three or four things you're working on at one time, building a Wonder over here, getting the next tech over there. You're always drawn to that next event."

Meier sees *Civilization* as a game that, by necessity and design, was based purely on gameplay ideas. "That was all we had in those days. We had a four-colour version of this game, so we weren't living or dying based on awesome graphics, and that core of gameplay has only gotten better as we've been able to improve the graphics and the presentation and add these other things to it.

"So it's timeless in the sense that it wasn't something designed just to exploit the technology of the moment. There were some pretty solid gameplay ideas that would only get better as the technology improved. And then it also had the benefit of various designers working on it. I did the first one, Brian Reynolds did the second, Jeff Briggs the third, so we've all understood the core mechanic and appeal to it, but also having a fresh perspective every time has allowed the game to grow."

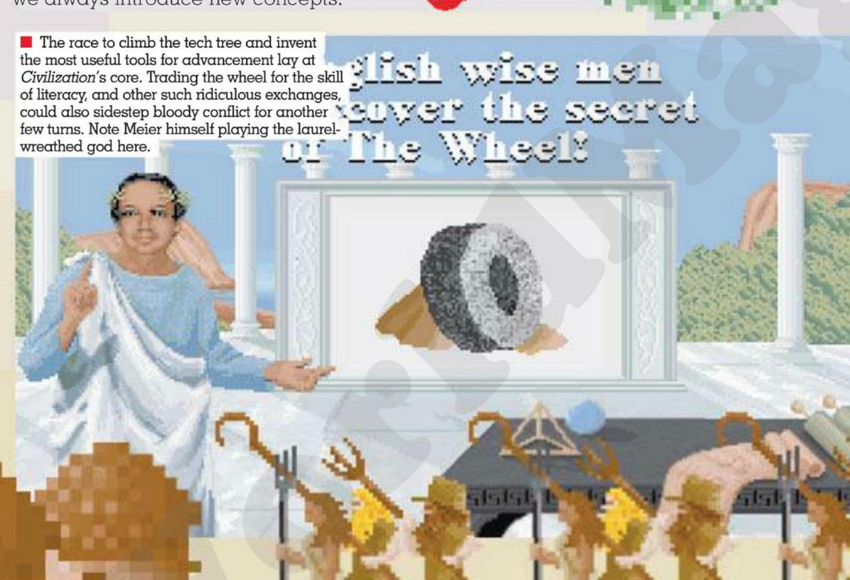
Meier reflects on the community that built up around the game, and that he credits with inspiring every subsequent iteration. "People just kind of took ownership of the game. It was almost a cliché that I would get letters in those early days after *Civ* came out. Paragraph one was always, 'Sid, you know, I like your game *Civilization*, I've been having a lot of fun with it.' Then paragraph two was always, 'And here's how I would change it. Do this, add this, I want this...' and then paragraph three was always, 'Thank you for reading my letter. If you're hiring game designers I'm available. Best wishes.'" So people just kind of played the game and enjoyed it, but also felt it empowered them as designers. Or they felt it was accessible to them and wanted to contribute to it.

"And hopefully, we respected and managed it well. The years between iterations was enough time to justify a new version. We have this internal rule that says 'one third tested, one third improved, and one third new'. The games are always based on the core *Civilization*, but we always introduce new concepts."

GAMING CIRCLES

■ *CIVILIZATION* MAY have been based on a similarly-named board game from 1980, but the massive popularity of the ensuing videogames meant that the concept hit cardboard and plastic again, and on no less than two occasions. 2002 saw designer Glenn Drover's release, based on *Civilization III*, while 2010's more advanced attempt by Kevin Wilson took in *Civ IV* and its various expansion packs. Both games observed the turn-based nature of the videogames by splitting gameplay into various 'phases' of trade, movement and management, and included multiple win conditions like the more advanced versions of Sid Meier's titles.





■ The race to climb the tech tree and invent the most useful tools for advancement lay at *Civilization*'s core. Trading the wheel for the skill of literacy, and other such ridiculous exchanges, could also sidestep bloody conflict for another few turns. Note Meier himself playing the laurel-wreathed god here.

BEST BOSS

POKÉMON: GOLD/SILVER
GAME BOY COLOR [Nintendo] **2000**

■ DECEPTIVELY DEEP and ludicrously full of hidden goodies and optional extras, the *Pokémon* franchise is one that rewards persistence and exploration more than almost any other. But among the finest and most exciting secrets in the series' history is this particular encounter – a secluded showdown with 'Red' (AKA Ash Ketchum), the hero of the original games and the most powerful trainer in the land by no small margin. His high-level team is no pushover (with the exception of Pikachu, who is far less useful than the lying cartoon makes him out to be – time to man up and use that Thunderstone, Red), but with a healthy spread of moves and a lot of training, ardent trainers will eventually conquer this ultimate *Pokémon* challenge.



GODZILLA

:L96♂

HP:

193/290

THE COMPLETE HI



■ Offering the storage capacity of literally hundreds of floppy disks or game cartridges on each disc, companies scrambled to dominate the newly formed CD-ROM industry.

■ The hottest new tech at the arcades was Virtuality, which promised players true-to-life 'virtual reality' through head-mounted screens that tracked head movement.

■ In late 1991, Nintendo finally caught up with its competition by releasing its own 16-bit console in the United States – the mighty Super Nintendo Entertainment System, or SNES.

AS 1991 began, the consumer electronics industry was going gaga over CD-ROMs. For most, it was a new concept: discs that looked identical to those that played music were now being used to store massive amounts of data, literally hundreds of times as much as floppy disks and videogame cartridges were capable of holding. The possibilities seemed endless. Entire encyclopaedia sets could be reduced to a disc. The promise of multimedia meant that kids could explore the depths of the oceans, the world's greatest museums, and the past from their homes, with full-motion video to enhance their experiences.

CD drives for computers started materialising (though in very early and expensive form). Commodore got into the game by announcing its CDTV system. NEC continued to market its Turbo Duo CD system for playing CD-enhanced videogames. Japanese electronics giant Sony and the Netherlands' Philips, who together standardised the compact disc music format in the early Eighties, announced their own separate CD-ROM formats. Sega announced its Mega-CD add-on, and even SNK got into the game by announcing it would offer an alternative to its high end Neo Geo cartridge system that would play the same games from (painfully slow-loading) CDs.



■■■ BUT THROUGH all the announcements, one major player remained silent. Nintendo, which had recently debuted its 16-bit Super Famicom well behind similar machines from its competitors (and wouldn't debut the Americanised Super Nintendo until late 1991), seemed to also be behind the times with this fresh new format. There were rumours that the company was developing a CD-ROM format with Sony, but it wasn't until the middle of the year that this speculation was confirmed, and then some. The events that followed were some of the most bizarre in corporate videogame history, with Nintendo ultimately giving birth to its own biggest threat.

On Friday, 31 May, the day before the biannual Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago (the E3 of its day), Sony held a press conference and

STORY OF GAMES

announced that it would enter the home videogame market with the Play Station (note the space: this was unrelated to the later PlayStation we all know and love). The Play Station was the result of a deal signed the prior year between Sony and Nintendo. This standalone system would accept games in two formats: traditional Super Famicom cartridges, and new CD-ROM games on Sony's proprietary Super Disc format.

The next day – though Sony tried in vain to stop it – Nintendo held its own press conference. Most in attendance expected the company to unveil the final release information and price point for its Super Nintendo (which it did), but none expected its second, bigger announcement: a second CD-ROM system!

Nintendo announced that it had entered an agreement with Philips – Sony's biggest rival – to develop an add-on unit for the Super Nintendo. The unit would plug into the bottom of the system and accept its own CD games, which would not be compatible with Sony's system, though it would be compatible with Philips' new multimedia CD-i standard.

We may never know exactly why Nintendo signed its original deal with Sony, but we do know one thing: the company didn't like it. The deal gave Sony complete control over its Super Disc format: any CD games would be approved by Sony and Sony alone, and the company would take the lion's share of the profits. Sony would steal away Nintendo's existing customers with the Play Station (set to debut in Japan by the end of the year) and wow them with the new CD games, and Nintendo would be stuck watching on the sidelines. For a company that built its videogame empire through completely controlling the market, this was unacceptable.

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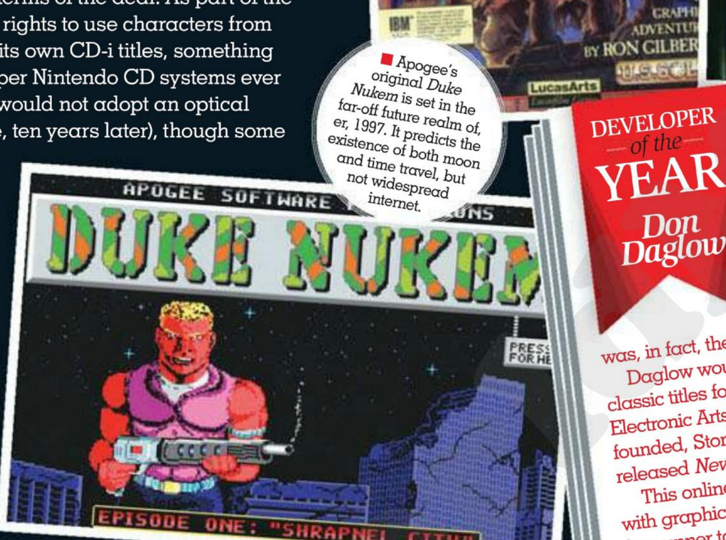
BY ALL accounts, the Philips deal was signed in haste in order to slow down the Play Station launch and, perhaps, help the companies renegotiate the terms of the deal. As part of the negotiations, Nintendo gave the company the rights to use characters from its *Mario*, *Zelda* and *Donkey Kong* games for its own CD-i titles, something unheard of for the company. Neither of the Super Nintendo CD systems ever managed to come out (and indeed, Nintendo would not adopt an optical disc format until the launch of the GameCube, ten years later), though some regrettable Philips-published CD-i games using those Nintendo characters would.

Whether Nintendo ever actually planned to offer a CD-i attachment for its Super Nintendo, or if the deal was purely to scare Sony, is a matter of historical debate, and is yet another question that we'll never know the answer to. Sony, gravely offended by the way things transpired, cancelled its plans for the original Play Station and instead went back to the drawing board and developed a 32-bit, 3D-based console of its very own, the PlayStation. But that story will have to wait until 1994.



Some of Maxis' attempts to expand the *Sim* brand were more successful than others. *SimAnt* was the first effort, followed the year after by *SimLife*, and in 1993 by *SimFarm*.

The golden age of PC adventure games was still in full swing in 1991. LucasArts' *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* was undoubtedly a highlight.



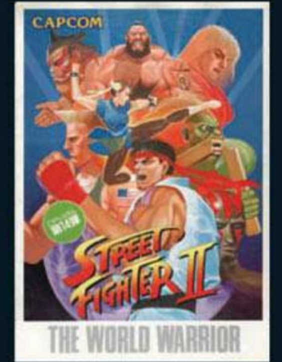
Apogee's original *Duke Nukem* is set in the far-off future realm of, er, 1997. It predicts the existence of both moon and time travel, but not widespread internet.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR: Don Daglow

Don Daglow may not be a name familiar to most gamers, but his place in history is unmistakable. Daglow released his first game way back in 1971 – a mainframe, text-based baseball simulator that was, in fact, the first baseball videogame.

Daglow would go on to work on several classic titles for the Intellivision and for Electronic Arts, but in 1991 the studio he founded, Stormfront, and partner AOL released *Neverwinter Nights*.

This online RPG was the first MMO with graphics, and is in many ways the forerunner to titles like *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* and *World Of Warcraft*.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1991**

STREET FIGHTER II

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we perfect our spinning piledriver

TECHNICALLY, FIGHTING games existed before 1991. If you want to get really specific, the first side-view, one-on-one fighting game is about as old as the arcade industry itself: Sega's 1976 coin-op *Heavyweight Champ*, while extremely crude, can reasonably be called the prototype for the genre. Much later games like *Karate Champ*, *Yie Air Kung Fu* or even *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* might be credited for popularising the idea of a one-on-one martial arts fight, though even they seem crude these days.

But it wasn't until Capcom's *Street Fighter II* that fighting games were truly birthed. The sequel to a 1987 game that was, frankly, not very good, *Street Fighter II* was Capcom's most ambitious game to date. The game's huge, detailed sprites offered a wide range of personality to the eight World Warriors playable in the game (and the four iconic boss characters that had to be defeated to emerge victorious). Ryu was the disciplined martial arts master, while Ken was the more reckless American hotshot. Blanka was a man raised in the wild, so separated from humanity that his skin became a sickly green. Dhalsim was a pacifist going against his morals to enter the *Street Fighter* tournament in order to save his village. And so it went from there.

STREET FIGHTER II WAS CAPCOM'S MOST AMBITIOUS GAME TO DATE

Fighting games had been two-player affairs literally from the beginning, but it was *Street Fighter II* that made fighting games into a spectator sport. Players would crowd around machines and watch battles as if they were boxing matches, with the loser quietly bowing out to the end of the line while a new challenger took their place in the queue. Arcade operators, sensing this new phenomenon, began installing second monitors on top of the machines so that players could spectate from far distances, a technique borrowed from the runaway success of *Dragon's Lair* in 1983.

Street Fighter II introduced so many innovations that it should rightfully be considered the father of the modern fighter. Hidden special moves did not debut here (that credit goes to the original), but they were made much less frustrating to pull off. The game introduced combos, drop-in challengers, and the idea of several characters with unique move sets that could all be mastered in several different ways.

The game may not be a favourite in modern tournaments, as it's been outclassed by its successors, but remarkably the original *Street Fighter II* still holds up as a game worth playing.

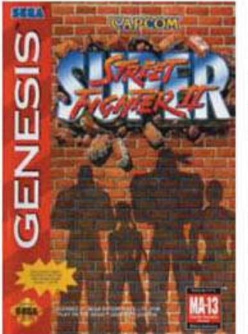


Special moves, such as Ryu's fireball, became a staple of the genre starting with this game.



Ken and Ryu from the original *Street Fighter* game returned, though players could now choose from six other varied combatants too.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ *STREET FIGHTER II* sparked a phenomenon that still lives on today. The game was improved upon in several subsequent updates (*Champion Edition*, *Turbo*, *Super*, *Super Turbo*), was spun off several times and, occasionally, was properly sequelised (we're only now on *Street Fighter IV*).

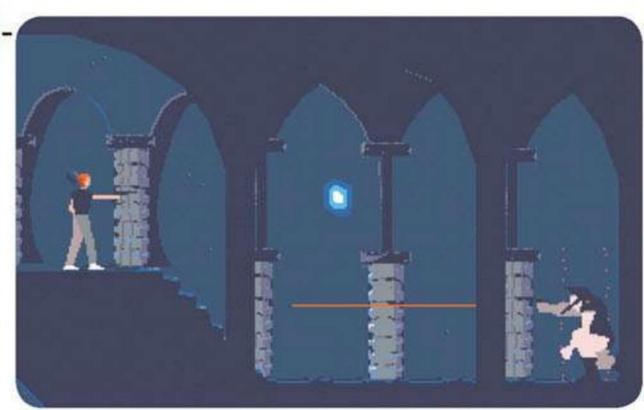
The game was also copied, ripped off and tweaked by just about every videogame maker in the Nineties. Some of these companies were taken to court but, eventually, it was just kind of accepted that all of the tropes were now part of the language of fighting games. SNK, the creator of titles like *Fatal Fury*, *Art Of Fighting* and *Samurai Shodown*, owes a whole lot to *Street Fighter II*.

And we'd be remiss to not mention the merchandising empire that came from this game's overnight success, too. There were action figures, comic books, television cartoons, and regrettably, a couple of really lousy Hollywood movies that everyone involved would rather forget about.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR...

ANOTHER WORLD



■ THIS SIDE-SCROLLING adventure, set in a strange alien world, was a true auteur's vision from Eric Chahi. The game was cinematic in seamless ways, putting the player into its world through dynamic in-game events rather than relying on the trope of a non-interactive cut-scene (though it had those too!).

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST



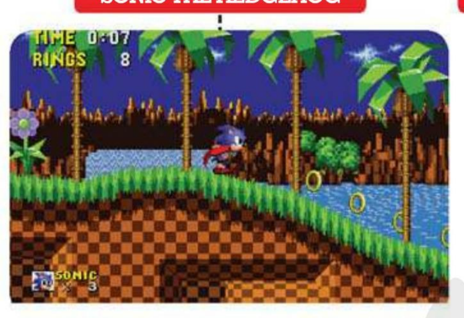
■ NINTENDO'S POPULAR adventuring series made its 16-bit debut with this third title, a return to the original top-down roots of the first game in many ways, and an all-time favourite for many gamers. With clever dungeon designs, a light and dark world motif and lots of weapons, many consider this to be the clay from which all future entries were shaped.

LEMMINGS



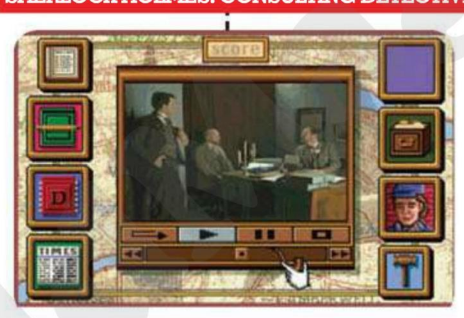
■ WHAT STARTED off as a series of joke animations to test how many tiny sprites an Amiga could handle at once turned into one of the most addictive puzzle games of all time, as players scratched their heads into baldness and lost sleep trying to figure out how to rescue all of the little guys in each stage with limited resources. *Lemmings* was a huge success that spawned multiple sequels.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG



■ SEGA FINALLY found its *Mario* killer in this speedy platformer, which was bundled with its 16-bit Genesis upon release in order to get it into as many hands as possible. Sega flaunted the superior processing power by making a game that ran as fast as possible, and threw in a cool protagonist that made Mario look like a fat, middle aged plumber.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: CONSULTING DETECTIVE



■ THIS ADVENTURE game starring the world's greatest detective (unless you fall into the Batman camp on that debate) may not be among the genre's most well-remembered efforts these days, but at the time the game actually delivered on the promise of a CD-ROM future where videogames could look and act just like the movies.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: PSone
YEAR: 1999
PUBLISHER: New Corporation
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £70



EXHIBIT A: As far as PlayStation discs go this one's pretty stunning. The presentation, in game and out, is impressive.



EXHIBIT B: Some copies of *The Adventures Of Little Ralph* included this exclusive sticker set. It's believed they were given away with pre-orders.



EXHIBIT C: Copies do pop up online from time to time. Because of its quality, though, you can expect to pay a pretty penny.

THE ADVENTURE OF LITTLE RALPH

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

WHY IT'S RARE

RELEASED IN 1994, the original PlayStation showed impressive staying power, with the PSone variant released as late as 2000. But by 1999 the world had already entered the next 'sixth' generation of videogaming.

The Dreamcast was a year old, Sony had announced the PS2, which was released in Japan the following year, and amusement arcades were once again popular hangouts for gamers, providing them with a likely glimpse of what this new generation of gaming might hold.

Only released in Japan, developed by a relatively unknown developer, appearing on a six-year-old machine, and being a cutesy 2D platform game (and a challenging but quirky and surprisingly polished one at that) released into a time when three-dimensional gaming had pretty much become the standard for mainstream game releases, *The Adventure Of Little Ralph* had all the hallmarks of a title that would drown in a sea of apathy from gamers, and become a hidden gem in years to come.

And that's pretty much the story. Because it is fairly unheard of, *The Adventure Of Little Ralph* isn't the most difficult PlayStation title to come by. Copies still aren't common, however, and because of its quality those that do appear often command a pretty steep price.



FACT!
Developer New Corporation's small back catalogue also includes the *Boxer's Road* series and the *Captain Commando* PlayStation port.

WORTH PLAYING?

■■■ ON THE SURFACE, *Little Ralph* looks little more than a polished cutesy 2D platformer, but its stunning presentation, detailed sprites, lively animations and colourful stages belie a deep and grown-up platform game.

Its gameplay is very much combat-oriented, with its sword-wielding hero Ralph, who gets turned into a little kid by an evil demon at the start of the adventure, given a variety of different attacks with which to dispatch his enemies. This marries brilliantly with a score multiplier system that sees Ralph chaining kills by deflecting enemies and their projectiles using his sword, as well as collecting pieces of fruit that appear throughout the stages. Further emphasising its action tone, some boss encounters also take the form of a pretty convincing one-on-one fighter.

A warning, though: even with the unlimited continues it dishes out *The Adventure Of Little Ralph* is extremely challenging. But given how much copies usually fetch, that it offers heaps of value and lasting challenge is probably a plus anyway. Indeed, it has rightfully garnered a reputation for being something of a hidden gem, and a must-play for discerning fans of the platform genre. So yes, it's absolutely worth playing.





I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Tommi Wallenius**
Occupation: **Student**

■■■ What is it about the PlayStation, and The *Adventure Of Little Ralph* in particular, that is attractive to you?

Little Ralph was my first import game for PlayStation. My main interest in the game was that it had so little information on the internet. All the discussion and the reviews were praising about its greatness, so I had to check it out for myself. I was very excited when I first got and played it. Then I really saw why it was so well received. I rank it as one of the best platformers, along with my favourite, *Super Mario World*.

Please tell us how/where you found the game.

I found it five years ago from a gaming forum. I searched for it for a couple of months. It doesn't pop up that often.

What condition was the game in, and how much did you pay for it?

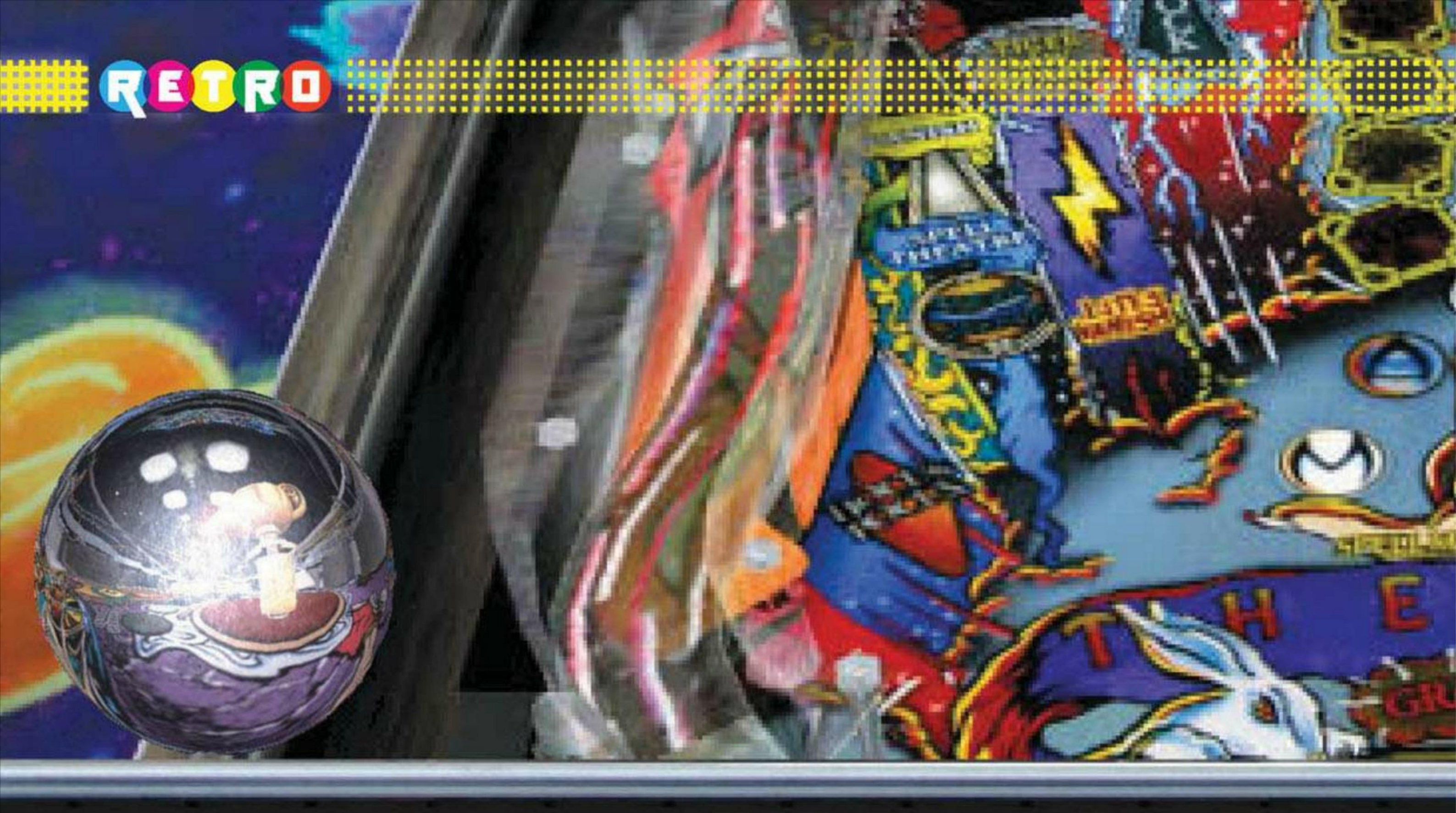
The game was in very good condition, and it was complete. It even had the spine card that is included with NTSC-J PlayStation titles. I paid $95 for it at the time.

Do you actually play *The Adventure Of Little Ralph* and, if so, what do you think of it?

Yes, I play it. I have completed it a few times, and every once in a while I just want to have a little fun ride with it. It's an addictive game because there is a point system. To score high you have to collect hidden fruits. This is one of the elements that I really like in the game. Also I love 2D platformers and the graphics are fantastic, as is the presentation – you can see birds flying in the air, et cetera. The main reason why I love this game is that you can defeat your enemies in different ways. This is quite rare for a platform game.

Finally, would you ever consider selling the game or is it yours for life?

I rarely sell games, and especially not my favourite games. But if I was really in a desperate situation, maybe I would sell it. Otherwise I would say no.



PINBALL REALITIES

Pinball Arcade is an ambitious new way to play pinball. Multiple platforms, realistic physics, regular new tables and reasonable pricing all match Zen Pinball's approach. Here, however, the focus is on emulating and preserving classic tables rather than inventing new designs. **games™** speaks to FarSight Studios about the development difficulties and legal wrangling involved in bringing such an ambitious emulation project to life

***PINBALL ARCADE* MAY** appear similar to *Zen Pinball*, but its approach couldn't be more different. Rather than *Zen*'s virtual pinball it emulates real tables. A new generation of players, without access to dwindling arcades, can continue to fall for classic pinball machines thanks to the work of *Pinball Arcade*.

This is a tall order. Developing electronic pinball of any kind is no mean feat, even when you aren't trying to emulate machines loved by players the world over. The portrait play field and physical nature of the game don't easily lend themselves to representation on landscape TV screens with multiple-buttoned controllers.

Despite this there have been successes. From *Space Cadet 3D Pinball* – which came with various versions of Windows – to the outstanding *Pinball Dreams* and *Fantasies* games on the Amiga and more recently *Zen Pinball*, a steady stream of titles have combined pinball's two-flippered premise with a variety of videogame innovations.

While these games shouldn't be underestimated, they circumnavigate rather than climb the pinball mountain. To conquer that summit requires more than a grasp of physics. Truly capturing pinball in videogame form requires a precise recreation of the physical table design, pixel perfect emulation of the dot matrix display and a good helping of craft to fit these elements together as a cohesive whole.

Starting with *Microsoft Pinball Arcade* in 1998 and continuing with the *Pinball Hall Of Fame* series on various platforms, preserving pinball in this way has been attempted a number of times. FarSight Studios has led this charge in recent years with both the Gottlieb and Williams *Pinball Hall Of Fame* collections. This year the developer returns with its new project: *Pinball Arcade*.

Bobby King, director of development at FarSight Studios and lead designer of *Pinball Arcade* is emphatic that classic pinball design is more than a match for even the most innovative virtual pinball tables.

"We wanted to make a pinball game, but we knew that great pinball design is a rare skill obtained through years of experience, so we looked into what manufacturer licences would be feasible to obtain. Our first pinball game, *Pinball Hall Of Fame: The* continued>.


TIGER SAW
HAUNTED
BASEMENT
METAMORPHOSIS
SPELL
MAGIC
STRAIT JACKET
TO LITE LOCKS
FINALE
ILLUSIONS
METAMORPHOSIS
STRAIT JACKET
HAT MAGIC
EXIT
MIDNIGHT
ILLUSIONS
LANE CHANGE



Like Microsoft's *Game Room*, *Pinball Arcade* will live or die on its ability to churn out regular content.

Gottlieb Collection was published by Crave in 2004 and was relatively successful. We followed this up with a game that had better physics and a better collection of tables, *Pinball Hall Of Fame: The Williams Collection*."

Pressing him on the specifics of a great table, it's as if we've asked him to pick a favourite child. "This isn't that easy to answer. It's sort of like trying to describe what elements are in classic movies. There are so many great pinball tables that are completely different! For the gameplay to become addictive, the design is typically deep, offers many different ways to score, and features solid geometry without overwhelming or underwhelming the player."

King has an obvious respect and awe for the tables that he is preserving in emulated form. This may surprise those who haven't spent a lot of time playing real pinball. The physical nature of these tables justifies many more hours of effort, design and craft to be lavished on them before they are manufactured in their thousands.

Videogames may be more advanced technologically, but similar to low-tech board games' ability to offer greater depth and maturity than their electronic counterparts, pinball's long history is not to be sniffed at. "Most people have no idea how deep the gameplay is in a classic pinball table. For players who want to master tables, they can study our instructions, which are hundreds of pages

Top Tables

The following tables are part of Pinball Arcade's initial release:

THEATRE OF MAGIC
Bally, 1995

A FUN table that used various practical tricks, including mirrors and magnets, to create a feeling of impossible magic happening on the play field. The moment multiball is activated, making the ball levitate and then disappear, is one of the coolest moments in pinball, although it obviously seems less magical on a virtually recreated table.

RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT
Stern, 2003

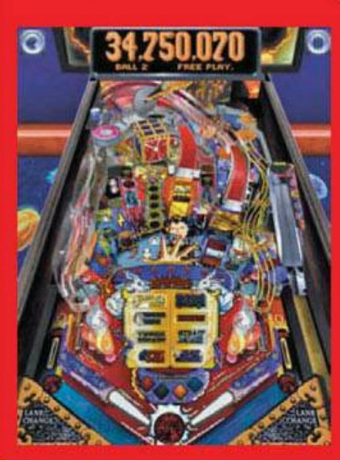
THE MODERN age of pinball is fairly depressing. Only one manufacturer remains, and creates a single table each year. Stern's group of pinball veterans, however, are capable of churning out excellently designed tables. *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* is designed by Pat Lawlor, creator of what is arguably the most popular pinball table of all time, *The Addams Family*. Its most notable features are a magnet that can stop and hold the ball, and a noughts and crosses game used to open up a locked area of the play field.

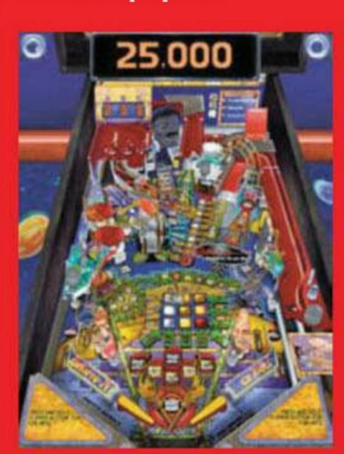
BLACK HOLE
Gottlieb, 1981

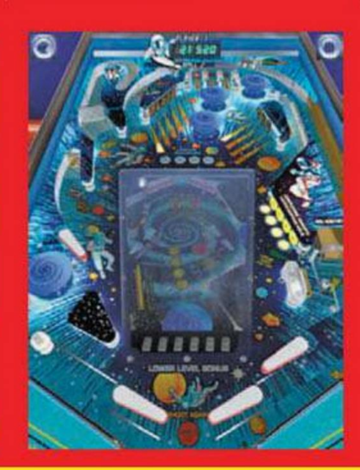
ONE OF the most famous and iconic pinball tables ever released, *Black Hole* is the game most *Pinball Arcade* players will gravitate towards first. Its most memorable feature is a smaller play field, set into the base of game and covered by glass in the upper play field. Figure out how to get to the lower table and you then have to contend with the fact that it plays upside down. *Black Hole* is generally considered to be the highest grossing pinball table of all time.

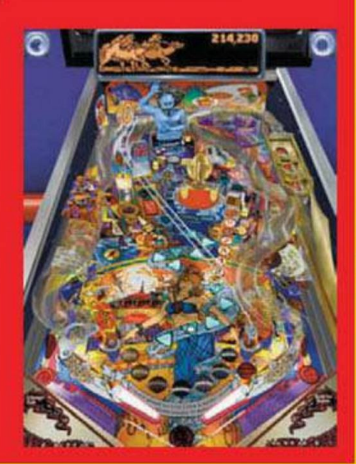
TALES OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS
Williams, 1996

MUCH LIKE *Theatre Of Magic*, *Tales Of The Arabian Nights* features a number of toys on the table that perform all sorts of astonishing tricks including, again, ball levitation. This particular game, however, is best loved for its beautiful aesthetics and high levels of attention to detail in the physical parts. The cutlass shaped plunger, for example, is a nice thematic touch.









long. This is what separates *Pinball Arcade* from other video pinball games. Each of the games we are recreating took between a year to a year and half to originally design and for pinball experts to craft them into masterpieces."

The challenge here is not only recreating the physical tables and emulating their logic, but also the minefield of intellectual property bound up with each machine. "Obtaining the manufacturing licences for Bally, Williams, Stern and Gottlieb was the first step. Many of the greatest tables also have ancillary licences that are needed. There are several obstacles – cost and royalties, expectations from IP holders, previous exclusivities in the videogame space, and a couple of big companies that aren't interested in what they consider relatively minor profit potential."

It's an approach that is the antithesis of the Visual Pinball project. Since 2000 this has offered its community a freeware pinball engine that, when twinned with the Visual PinMAME emulator, could be used to recreate classic tables. Although this started with a flurry of excitement, and many hours of work put in by its enthusiast users, its unofficial relationship with the intellectual property on which it relies keeps the project in the shadows.

King shared his thoughts on the grass-roots preservation of Visual Pinball. "To our knowledge, the Visual Pinball project has not licensed any of the IP they use. It's been suggested by many people (and our licensors) that we challenge them legally. However, we currently have no plans to do that. We think that Visual Pinball is good for pinball as a whole. I have not spent much time with their simulations, but I've been told that our game compares very favourably."



Genie takes a spin in *Tales Of The Arabian Nights.*

FARSIGHT STUDIOS' APPROACH of building up a war chest of rights to various pinball games should stand it in good stead in the coming months and years to when the company needs to start delivering the promised additional tables for the *Pinball Arcade* engine.

Asking King which tables they have set their sights on, it was evident that patience is another quality a videogame pinball developer needs, along with dogged determination. "*Twilight Zone*, *The Addams Family*, *Monster Bash* and *Terminator 2* are probably requested the most. *Addams Family* licensing would include licences from The Addams Foundation, Paramount Pictures, every actor used on the table and the music (which was an MC Hammer version of the theme from the movie). We're not giving up on *Addams Family* despite all the rights we'd need. It's a great table!"



BOBBY KING
Farsight Studios

Despite this expertise, FarSight's pinball games have not found great success at retail. King admits that, "Despite great reviews the sales were not nearly as good." What makes him confident that this won't be the case for *Pinball Arcade*?

"In our opinion, this was due in part to [the *Pinball Collection* games] being released on platforms that were too new in their life cycle for retailers to distribute what was considered more of a mass market game. We weren't about to give up. We acquired more licences and the rights to publish and distribute digitally ourselves."

This means that FarSight can now distribute *Pinball Arcade* directly, as well as partnering with publishers like Crave where appropriate. The different versions can be tailored to each platform, both to take advantage of its features as well as match the requirements of its players. It can also mirror Visual Pinball's approach of delivering the game engine and tables separately, a route that *Zen Pinball* also takes.

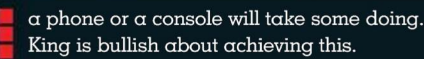
Having been available on iOS and Android for some time, the first two DLC tables, *Medieval Madness* and *The Machine: Bride Of Pin*Bot*, have been added to the four existing tables on those devices that are each purchased individually.

The 360 version is 800 MSP and comes with four starter tables, with the option of more via 400 MSP DLC packs. The PS3 and Vita games are bundled together and will follow the 360 version, priced at around £6.50. The PC version rounds out the initial release later in the spring, with future versions promised for Wii U and 3DS.

Delivering a comparable experience across so many different platforms will be a technical challenge. Managing players' expectations when they may be playing the game on continued>.



There's a *Theatre Of Magic* table near the **games**™ office. It's not getting any more of our pocket change now.

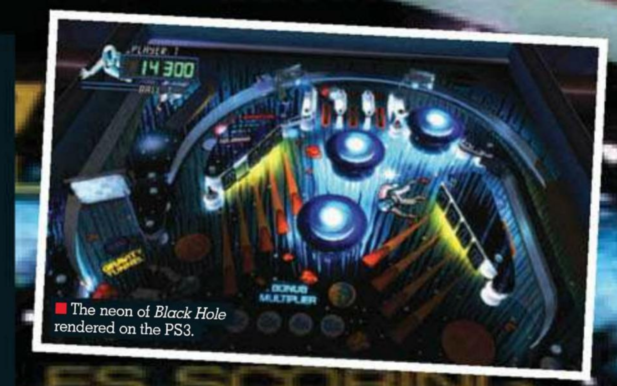


a phone or a console will take some doing. King is bullish about achieving this.

"Gameplay-wise, our goal is to get the game playing as similarly as possible on every platform. That said, not all mobile devices can run the game at 60 FPS (which the console versions run consistently), but even at 30 FPS the game is still a great experience. Also, the gameplay has a very different feel if you're holding a controller or using a touch screen. The biggest difference being that nudging is much easier using the analogue stick of a controller."

There are certainly plenty of challenges here; so many platforms, tables and so much red tape. It's a fine line that FarSight is planning to walk. With the iPhone, iPad and Android versions already out it has made a good start. However, King is right; nudging is the weak point of these touch screen devices, something that seems a little odd when it was done with such finesse on the excellent *Pinball Pulse* on Nintendo's DSi.

AMID THESE CHALLENGES, the rising tide of pinball's popularity is a genuine cause for hope. Like board games, there is a resurgence of interest in these physical experiences. King leans back and surveys the pinballing landscape for us. "Stern Pinball has been the only one releasing real pinball tables for some time now, and it appears that it's been doing relatively better as of late. A second company is due to release their first table later this year. We think that Stern's recent success is mostly due to the great tables being created there by the industry's legends they've hired, but we also think that the resurgence of video pinball has contributed to some degree to more interest in general. Quite a few people have told us that playing our game has turned them into real pinball fans and got them interested enough to start collecting actual tables."



The neon of *Black Hole* rendered on the PS3.



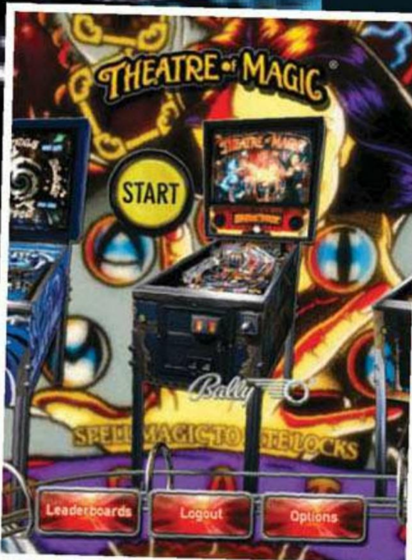
Physical table recreation is matched by the dot matrix score emulation.

WE'RE NOT GIVING UP ON THE ADDAMS FAMILY DESPITE ALL THE RIGHTS WE'D NEED

The sense of a bygone age is matched by King's less cutthroat approach to competition. "In addition to us, the Zen guys have done a good job of helping to bring pinball back too – at least digitally. They've done very well on XBLA. We hope to make the video pinball community even bigger, and rekindle real pinball even more with *Pinball Arcade*."

This is the talk of an enthusiast rather than a businessman. King is as at home discussing pinball tips and techniques as he is the numbers. He offers some advice to new players of *Pinball Arcade*: "Master the art of nudging the table without tilting. In general the key is ball control and knowing what to expect as much as possible. It is usually much easier to be consistent with a shot fired from a cradled position than when you hit the ball with a live deflection. But equally important, you should try to learn where and how the ball feeds towards the flippers as best you can and how to keep the pinball under control by mastering different passing and catching techniques.

"Great pinball was very successful during its golden age for a good reason. The design of the classic tables that we'll be reproducing has replayability that's just tremendous. We can't wait to introduce new players to this great gameplay." King certainly knows his pinball, and if things continue as they have started *Pinball Arcade* has a chance of helping to turn this once great pastime into a fresh modern obsession.



The menu system on *Pinball Arcade* does a nice job of presenting the tables in their original form.



The Best Of Virtual Pinball

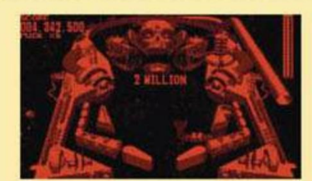
Classic pinball tables are great and everything, but there are some things videogame pinball can do that real tables can't. Here are a few of the best



ALIEN CRUSH

Format: PC Engine, Arcade
Developer: Naxat Soft

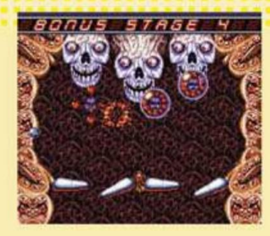
MIXING CLASSIC pinball gameplay with fantastical sci-fi elements, *Alien Crush* asked players to defeat a number of increasingly large extraterrestrial adversaries using only a pair of flippers and single silver ball. As an early virtual pinball release, *Alien Crush*'s masterstroke was that its developers realised that videogames didn't have to slavishly replicate the plastic and steel of real tables and could inject a bit of action and pizzazz – not ruining the game of pinball but enhancing it. Many imitators followed as a result.



GALACTIC PINBALL

Format: Virtual Boy
Developer: Intelligent Systems

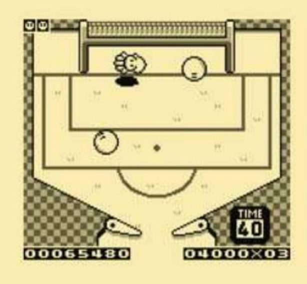
ACROSS ITS four separate tables, *Galactic Pinball* spices up its traditional gameplay with a boss battle against a giant alien, as well as a minigame that requires the player to break asteroids, with the pinball, against a 3D backdrop. Sadly, its home on Virtual Boy means few people have played *Galactic Pinball*. Perhaps a 3DS remake is in order, if only to show off one of the earliest cameo appearances from Samus Aran, years before she appeared in *Metroid Prime Pinball*.



DEVIL CRASH

Format: PC Engine, Mega Drive
Developer: Naxat Soft

THE SEQUEL to *Alien Crush* used a much more controversial theme than its PC Engine predecessor. Set within the bowels of hell, *Devil Crash* was packed with gory, demonic imagery and satanic iconography. Interestingly, the American release had all of its pentagrams removed to avoid upsetting Christian gamers, although the rest of the content was left intact. Like *Alien Crush* before it, it's these animated fantastical elements that set *Devil Crash* apart from the real thing.



KIRBY'S PINBALL LAND

Format: Game Boy
Developer: HAL Laboratory

LIKE *REVENGE Of The Gator* (below), *Kirby's Pinball Land* required the player to complete objectives on one table before progressing on to the next, making it as much of an adventure as a score attack game. Kirby's ball-like natural shape made him the perfect hero for a pinball game, so it's no surprise that Nintendo chose to adapt him to the format. He wouldn't be the last though. *Mario*, *Metroid* and *Pokémon* all followed *Kirby* onto the pinball tables in later years.

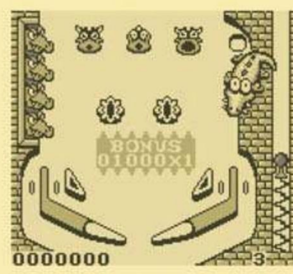




POKÉMON PINBALL

Format: Game Boy Color
Developer: HAL Laboratory

MORE THAN just pinball with a *Pokémon* skin, the idea of this innovative handheld game was to catch all of the 150 unique Pocket Monsters by completing a challenge for each. The task was impossible to complete in one sitting, meaning that the game would last for months if played properly – injecting some great replayability beyond just high score chasing. The cartridge is also notable as the first of only a handful of Game Boy Color games to come with a built-in rumble feature.



REVENGE OF THE GATOR

Format: Game Boy
Developer: HAL Laboratory

IN ORDER to reduce the amount of blur on the Game Boy's primitive screen, this crocodile-themed game used several interlinked small tables instead of a single scrolling one. The brilliance of this is that it allowed developer HAL Laboratory to design different challenges around each screen, giving *Revenge Of The Gator* a sense of narrative progression unlike anything in real pinball. It's a design that's been highly influential on virtual pinball games since.



SONIC SPINBALL

Format: Mega Drive
Developer:
Sega Technical Institute

SONIC SPINBALL takes the basic pinball gameplay and runs so far with it that some people might argue it's not really a pinball game at all. Us? We've had too much fun with this early *Sonic* spin-off to really care. For the most part, this is a series of sprawling levels with pinball-like gameplay throughout, but the ability to uncurl Sonic and move him around as normal adds another dimension that – once you get over how bold it is – makes this a fun and interesting game to play.



FANTASTIC PINBALL

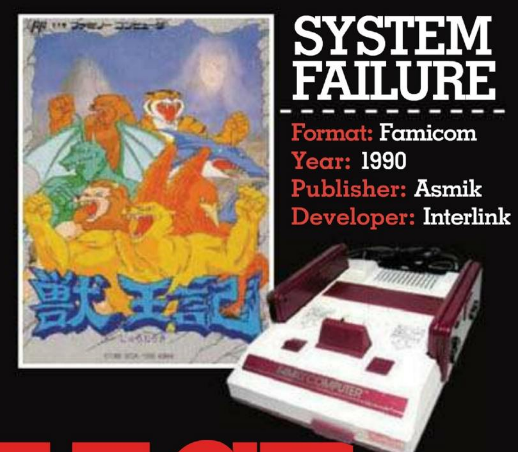
Format: PlayStation, Saturn
Developer: Tecno Soft

THIS 1995 Saturn/PlayStation title owes a lot to older pinball titles *Devil Crash* and *Alien Crush*, which is no particularly bad thing. Featuring plenty of hidden bonus screens, boss battles and table-specific objectives, *Fantastic Pinball* is a worthy successor to its inspiration, and one of the most underrated games on the 32-bit systems. And with three tables on the disc – each one a multi-screen game with tons of objectives – *Fantastic Pinball* lasts a very long time.



CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing arcade ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Famicom
Year: 1990
Publisher: Asmik
Developer: Interlink

ALTERED BEAST

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Sega System 16B **Year:** 1988 **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** In-house

THOUGH *ALTERED Beast*'s repetitive combat and drab level design comes under fire by those that question its classic game status, it was its presentation and atmosphere that saw it attract ten pence pieces, not its gameplay.

With its sprites and stages packed with detail, imagination and animation, it looked stunning. And for a videogame it told an unusually bleak story too. You assume the role of a dead Roman solider resurrected by Zeus to save his daughter Athena from a powerful demon, and to take on the underworld he is given the power to transform into a series of different manimals.

It's a rescue mission loaded with an impressive number of well-designed bosses and enemies, and many would gruesomely explode into blood and bones at the fists, feet, claws and fireballs of our shape-shifting hero. For this reason, it was a common sight to see an *Altered Beast* machine sitting in the smoke-and-ale-smelling sections of a pub rather than its Family Room.

Altered Beast's classic status was quickly sealed when it became the first pack-in game for the Mega Drive in North America, and like the majority of popular Eighties coin-ops was later ported to a large number of 8- and 16-bit computers and consoles. But as its strong visuals and presentation were its biggest strengths, the 8-bits ports only really succeeded in highlighting the monotony of its action.

Only released in Japan, and going by *Altered Beast*'s Japanese title *Juuouki (Chronicles Of The Beast King)* this fairly obscure Famicom port is the most bizarre looking version of *Altered Beast* to see release. With its peculiar squat, cartoony sprites and the gore sanitised, it holds very little nostalgic value. In fact, it almost feels like one of those bizarre NES spoofs, akin to *Mighty Final Fight* and *Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti*.

Unfortunately though, the problems do break its skin. This conversion suffers from twitchy enemies with frustrating attack patterns, something that isn't helped by its unresponsive controls and imprecise collision detection. Hitting airborne enemies is particularly maddening, as is slaying the all-important spirit-dropping albino wolves, while jumping is so imprecise you'll be cursing the few platform sections this port has rather than welcoming the variety they bring. And though it does play a pretty faithful rendition of the original music, this conversion is also missing the memorable speech samples from the arcade game. This is one beast that's lacking any beauty.

HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



FAMICOM



THE BREAKDOWN

1 With graphics suffering from NES game syndrome, the player and enemy sprites look small and lost against their backgrounds. One third of the screen is also given to a health meter and some hilariously out-of-place lives icons. This is *Altered Beast* not *Psycho Fox*.

2 The Famicom conversion features three new stages, and with them some additional bosses and beast forms to change into: lion, phoenix and shark. This makes this conversion unique, but not any better than the others – especially as the new underwater stage is brutally tough.

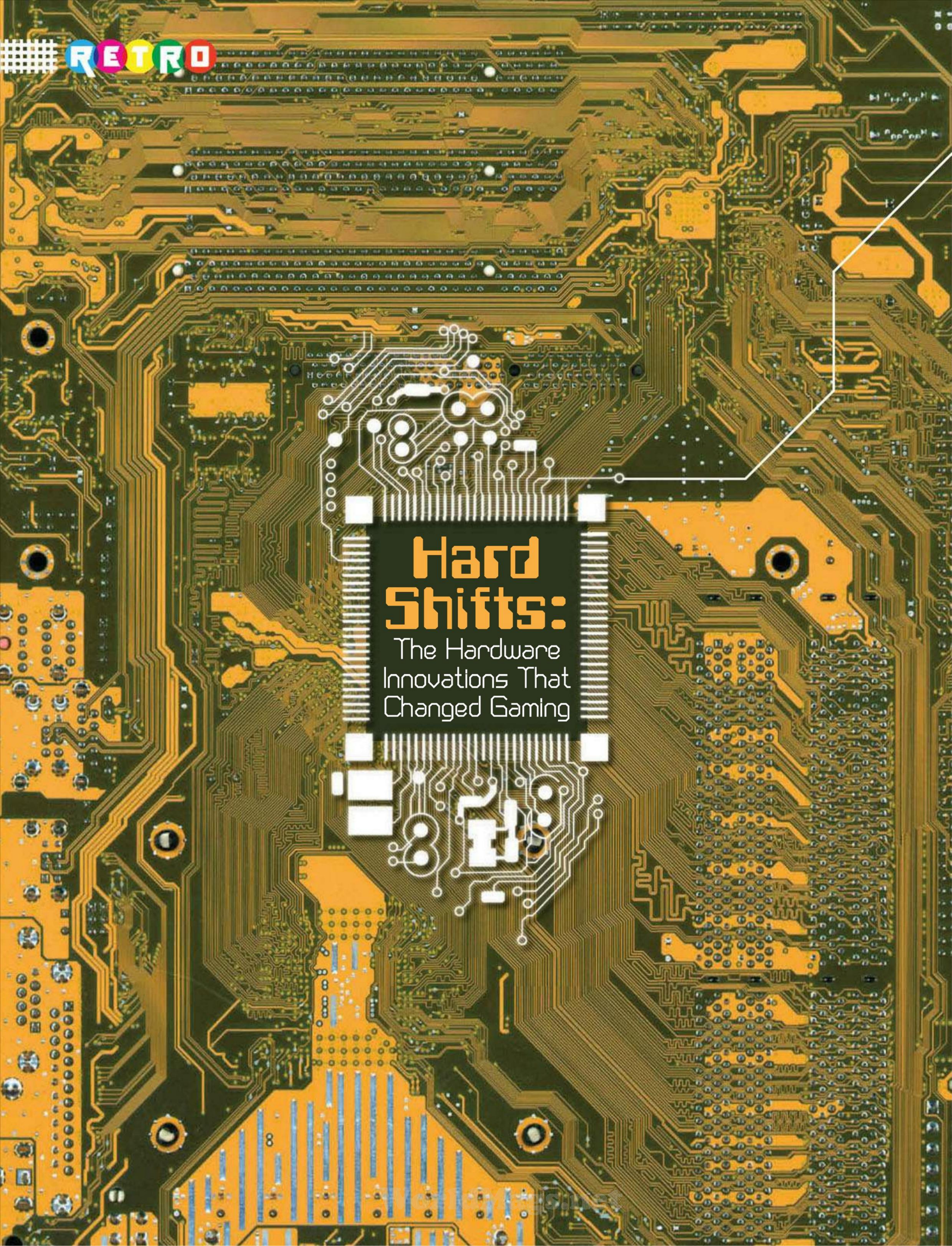
3 You'd think smaller sprites would make the game slightly easier. Not so. This port plays as badly as the rest. The controls are an issue and the collision detection is so bad it's visible. Expect maddening combat, frustrating falls to your death, possible tears and blue language.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Mega Drive** Year: **1988** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **In-house**



■ It's a no-brainer really. Wanting to prove its new 16-bit powerhouse could deliver a faithful arcade experience for the home, Sega delivered an impressive conversion for Mega Drive. Containing all the levels, gore, bosses and memorable speech, it was the version fans flocked to play.


RETRO
Hard Shifts:
The Hardware Innovations That Changed Gaming

HYPER-DETAILED HD graphics, touch controls, downloadable games… all interesting innovations in the world of videogame software, but they all need a good set of hardware behind them too. Moreover, they wouldn't be possible if not for the groundwork of previous hardware creations. It's typical technological progress: a few small steps in the beginning, and then many more giant leaps later on. Videogames have seen several hardware additions that went on to evolve and become standard parts of how we use systems and ultimately enjoy the games themselves. They're not all humongous milestones – we'll admit not everybody is going to put rumble motors on a pedestal – but they're all valid in tracing the history of game hardware. Read on as **games™** explores over a dozen of these electronic evolutions…

CPUs

■ IT'S SUCH A foregone conclusion now but, in the earliest days of videogames, they could only barely be considered computers. They weren't exactly powered by vacuum tubes, but it was just as daunting: a melange of wires, transistors, and other hobbyist-class parts which fashioned the monochrome ping-pongy paddlefests that helped spur this whole darn industry. Fortunately, a wave of arcade games like *Space Invaders* included mass-produced circuitry that enabled games to be made faster, and to give them bitmap graphics and the ability to be programmed by multiple people, instead of just one or two guys who knew how to wire the insides perfectly. Now, of course, every game system is a bona fide computer, and lately, what we call a CPU is really two or more microscopic CPUs in one, offering much more speed in computing power, and bringing us closer to more realistic fantasy.

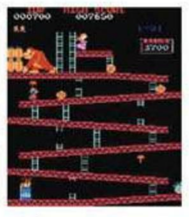
ESSENTIAL TO:



Space Invaders



Pac-Man



Donkey Kong

ROM Cartridges

■ THE BUSINESS MODEL of arcade games worked well for many years, wherein an arcade owner would buy new games that came in their own cabinets and try to make a profit off them until the next one came along. Though it was workable, it didn't really fit the home sector. Early home consoles were solid plastic boxes dedicated to a tennis or racing game, with a bunch of marginally different variations to create a sense of value. As in arcades, there were many copycats, but families didn't find it reasonable to spend more money on a new unit for 'new' games every few months. That all changed once cartridge-based systems like Atari's 2600 followed the cassette tape model and allowed different games to be plugged into a base unit. It also created the market for third-party games, which the industry has since become dependent on. It's now unimaginable for a system to have only one game in it. Recently, the idea has sort of folded in on itself – now you can download and keep multiple games, yet they don't leave the console you put them on.



■ Without cartridges, retro collections would be far less impressive.

ESSENTIAL TO:



Game Boy



3DS



Neo Geo

Battery backup

■ IMAGINE A primitive world where you stopped playing a game and then had to start all over again the next time you booted it up. Or, at best, be given passwords to write down, yet not always starting you with the exact progress you left off with. This was a reality that continued for nearly 20 years of videogaming, but the tide finally started to turn when Nintendo and other companies started making game cartridges with small batteries inside, which would retain save data on their own. It was like discovering Atlantis. It was the last piece of automation these machines could finally achieve without needing to keep track of passwords on note paper, or to have to block out entire weekends trying to finish a game in one sitting. Now all the memory cards, hard drives and built-in solid-state memory on our devices owe something to a little flat, silver battery that redefined what 'saving' meant in games. Thank goodness.

ESSENTIAL TO:







The Legend Of Zelda • Phantasy Star • Final Fantasy

Memory cards used to be just for teensy save files; now you can put several whole games on a console's hard drive.

Onboard storage

BATTERIES HAD SOLVED the saving problem for at least one period of gaming history, but as games got bigger, so did the amount of data they carried. For computers, a hard drive took care of all that just fine, but for consoles, there had to be something else. From the 32-bit days, consoles popularised memory cards, which let games record as much save data as they were able to hold, and if you needed more space, you just bought another one (a deviously brilliant additional revenue stream). As hard drives became more affordable, they became more practical in game systems, which brings us to today's consoles using onboard storage in the form of large-capacity hard drives. But even those are slowly fading away in favor of solid-state drives, which have no moving parts, but are still pricey, and of course, there's all this talk about the cloud, where your data is held on the company's big hard drives somewhere else on the planet.

ESSENTIAL TO:



Blinx: The Time Sweeper



DC Universe Online



LittleBigPlanet

Optical Media

CD-ROMS TURNED A medium for music into a standard for all digital content that still stands today. Compared to cartridges, the benefits were obvious: hundreds of megabytes of space to put in damn-near anything you wanted, from real recorded music to video, or high-resolution textures for 3D models. Cartridges got exponentially more expensive for even marginal bumps in capacity, so everyone from executives to the media was ready to wave goodbye to the cartridge as we knew it, despite the CD's biggest crutch: load times. Not everyone was on board, however. Nintendo bullheadedly stuck with cartridges for the Nintendo 64, yet that was just one of that system's problems. After that, though, every console used DVDs or some other optical media. That didn't mean it was a great idea every time, of course; many people couldn't get past the PSP using proprietary UMD media, which didn't exactly fit the accepted ideology of a portable system. Consoles still use discs today, but the lingering question is if future generations will even have a slot or tray for them at all.



ESSENTIAL TO:

Final Fantasy VII

The Curse Of Monkey Island

Guitar Hero

Tiny Screens

TO CALL SOMETHING a portable videogame in the Eighties meant either it was an arcade cabinet on wheels or some cheapo spawn of a calculator. It wasn't until later in that decade when cheap LCD screens made true portable systems possible and handhelds like Game Boy started offering a decent alternative to consoles. However, portable games weren't always about matching console quality, but offering their own unique advantages. Game Boy quickly became the go-to system for puzzle games, and gamers killed many minutes getting in a quick go on *Tetris*. As the years went on, TFT screens allowed for greater resolutions and more colourful displays, but games suited to being on the go still prevailed. Local multiplayer really took off as a result; Japan lapped up *Monster Hunter* on consoles, but went insane for it on handhelds, while the trading of Pokémon was only made possible by the ability to travel with your system.

ESSENTIAL TO:



Pokémon

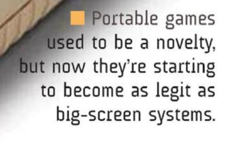


Monster Hunter





StreetPass



Portable games used to be a novelty, but now they're starting to become as legit as big-screen systems.

VGA

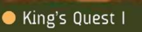
■ AMONG THE MANY high-tech things we take for granted these days, screen resolution is certainly one of the big ones. But in the beginning of desktop computers, it always could have been better. Early graphics standards were monochrome and low-res (EGA, CGA), but the advent of VGA finally brought richer colour (well, 16 colours) and TV-like resolution. Games took advantage of VGA quickly, but it was SVGA that really made a difference in the mid-Nineties. SVGA's 800x600 resolution was an immediate step over television (and by extension, home consoles), and enabled a staggering 256 colours to be displayed at once. Well, it was a big deal back then. Computer resolutions steadily grew, and continue to go well past the HDTV maximum. Although HDTV was developed years before it went into public use, it helped recent consoles come closer to parity with PC games, because without such leaps in display resolution, PCs would have taken an earlier and even greater leap in image quality, widening the gap further. (No, don't worry, your uber-bleeding-edge graphics card in your PC is still awesome. For now.)

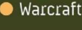


ESSENTIAL TO:





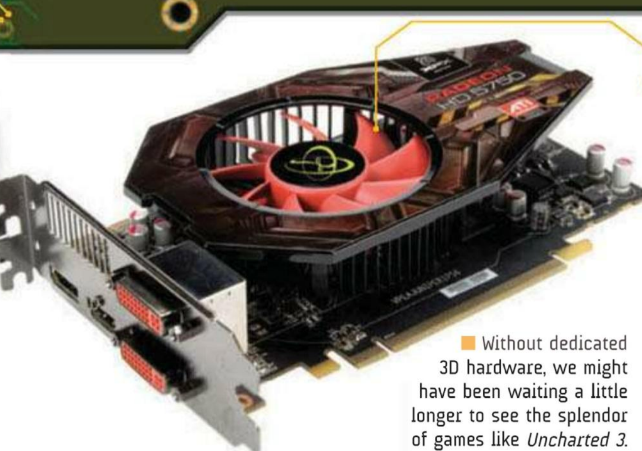




● King's Quest I ● Doom ● Warcraft

■ SVGA resolution used to be a milestone for PC gaming; now you wouldn't be caught dead running anything like *Crysis 2* at that size.

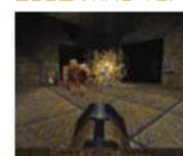
3D acceleration



■ Without dedicated 3D hardware, we might have been waiting a little longer to see the splendor of games like *Uncharted 3*.

■ TO ACCOMPLISH 3D polygon graphics, games used to do it through the software, using algorithms that generated polygons within the game itself. It wasn't always fast, and it was rarely beautiful, but it showed the potential for the future. Supercomputers had been generating such graphics for years, but weren't ready for the consumer markets yet. But in the mid-Nineties, dedicated PC graphics cards had their own chips for rendering polygon graphics all by themselves, leaving the rest of the game to being fun (hopefully). 32-bit consoles started to use 'accelerators' as well, and the PC cards just kept taking leaps forward, adding a greater number of polygons for greater detail, and truckloads of extra effects and features to fancy them up even more, using heady terminology like 'fill rate' and 'normal mapping'. Now, every PC and console has a dedicated graphics chip in it (or several), and that usually gets more attention from game geeks than the main processor does. It is the one that makes everything pretty, after all.

ESSENTIAL TO:





● Quake ● Super Mario 64 ● The Elder Scrolls III

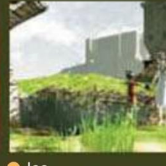
Rumble motors

■ THE CONUNDRUM OF getting a player 'closer' to a game has remained largely unsolved. Controllers were merely static utensils that did nothing but present you with buttons. One big step towards controllers being more immersive was the addition of rumble motors, as introduced in the Nintendo 64's Rumble Pak accessory. The motors served no other purpose than to vibrate your gamepad in sync with on-screen action, so it was originally written off as a gimmick. But Sony followed Nintendo's lead via its Dual Shock PSone controller, and from then on, they (and Microsoft) made rumble motors a standard part of their controllers – except for that lapse when the original PS3 pads didn't have it because of legal issues. Regardless, those chunky little motors seem destined to stay, both in controllers and their smaller, more annoying siblings in our mobile phones.

■ A game may have the biggest, loudest explosions, but a controller's rumble helps enhance the feel of them, too.

ESSENTIAL TO:





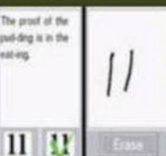
● Star Fox 64 ● Rez ● Ico



Touch control

TOUCH- AND PEN-BASED screens had been in use for many years, mostly as expensive computer tools, but for some reason it took a while for them to be adopted in high-profile videogames. The ball got rolling when PDAs hit it big in the Nineties, where you could play dinky games on your Palm Pilot if you were so inclined, yet those weren't being made by veteran game companies. It took until 2004 for one such company, namely Nintendo, to use touch screens as a gaming standard with the DS. A few years later, Apple debuted the iPhone, which used multi-touch and no stylus. Apple's not a game company, but the fidelity of the iOS platform brought hundreds of thousands of games to it, many from those aforementioned veteran companies. On the face of it, touch control isn't much different than using a mouse would be, but a game that uses touch to create more reactive games, like *Angry Birds*, is smart and profit-making.

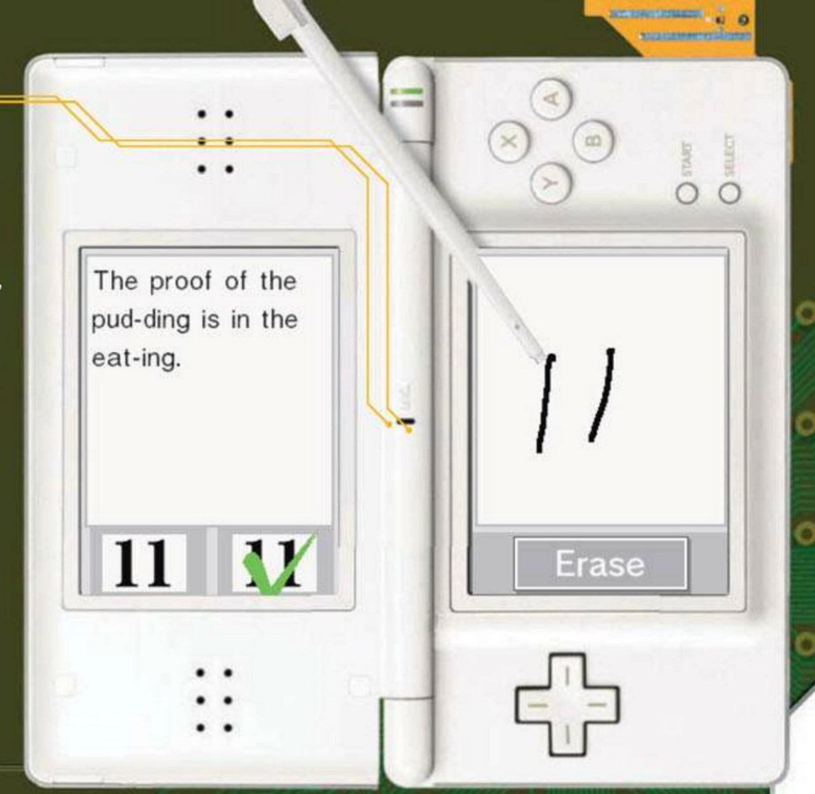
ESSENTIAL TO:



Brain Training


Elite Beat Agents


Draw Something



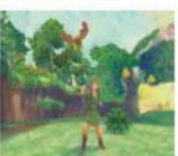
Motion sensors

IT WAS A gamer's fantasy for many years: 'Soon, controllers with buttons will be extinct, and we'll be playing videogames with our limbs.' A lofty idea then, and during that time there were only half-steps. By now, many are familiar with (and familiar with mocking) Mattel's *Power Glove* for the NES, which held the same basic concepts as the trusty Wii Remote, but it was an add-on and not a cohesive part of the system, so it failed. The push for 'virtual reality' in the Nineties also tried to legitimise motion control, but was relegated to expensive public showings. Other attempts came and went, but it wasn't until the Wii in 2006 that motion control reached legitimacy. By no means was it ultra-new technology but, by making it standard, Nintendo let more people be wowed by it. Outside of Wii, motion sensors of all kinds have been used to push gaming forward – from the cool Star Power tilt of *Guitar Hero* to the awesome potential of Kinect's full body sensing, all-seeing eye. Motion control has become a defacto part of game design and clearly has years of evolution ahead.



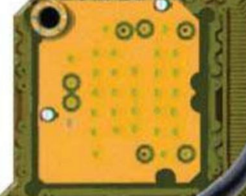
Controlling games with more than buttons seemed like sci-fi for many years, but in time millions of people were captivated by *Wii Sports*.

ESSENTIAL TO:


The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword

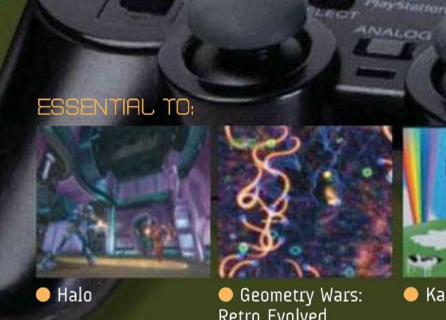

WarioWare: Twisted


Dance Central



Dual analogue sticks

MANY CONTROLLER INNOVATIONS are attributed to Nintendo, but Sony got in a good one that now everybody uses: not one, but two sticks. Having one was great for moving around in 3D space, and the obvious use of a second stick was for camera control. It's rarely deviated from that purpose, which is fine, because that was a driving force in first-person shooters finally gaining some steam on consoles. While discerning FPS players will always go for the keyboard and mouse for the ultimate in comfort and accessibility, there's no ignoring the tens of millions of console *Call Of Duty* players still twiddling away at thumbsticks. If only it didn't take Sony so long to put a second one on a handheld.



ESSENTIAL TO:

Halo

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved

Katamari Damacy

Analogue Triggers

■ RACING GAMES ARE nearly as old as videogames themselves, but if you desired a realistic wheel-and-pedals experience, you had to either spend small amounts of money at the arcade, or senseless amounts of money for a cheaply-made wheel you had to wrap your crotch around with pedals that wouldn't stay still even if you had the deepest shag carpeting. While it's impractical to stick a steering wheel on a standard controller (though lord knows they've tried), controllers have adopted the next best thing: analogue triggers, which are like little accelerator and brake pedals. Of course, they *are* called 'triggers', so we can't ignore their practicality in first-person shooters, either. In that case, they're not totally necessary – as mentioned, hardcore FPS players are fine with a PC mouse – but helped add a small percentage of realism to console games. It's also worth noting the GameCube's unusual triggers, which blended analogue with digital, allowing you to squeeze to a certain degree before pushing the trigger all the way in with a firm click. Very few games made use of this innovation, however, and no console has since copied the idea.

ESSENTIAL TO:


● Forza Motorsport


● Metal Gear Solid 2


● Super Mario Sunshine

■ Yes, resistive analogue triggers did do something good for videogames. Do you really want to play *Forza 4* with buttons? Didn't think so.

Modems

■ NETWORK GAMING WAS more or less invented the same day networks were, as the world's greatest computer nerds devised MUD (multi-user dungeon) games that let real people play computer RPGs with each other. But the popularity of long-distance gaming didn't reach new heights until later in the Nineties, when shooters like *Doom* allowed players more than just medieval romps. Shooters were the online games of choice for quite a while, until RPGs rose again as massively multiplayer endeavors. And once consoles began to support online play, well, there were hardly any games you *couldn't* play online.

ESSENTIAL TO:


● World Of Warcraft


● Call Of Duty


● Phantasy Star Online

Multi-ports

■ BEFORE ONLINE GAMING took off it was common for friends to, you know, play games together while gathered around a TV set. In the early days though, this wasn't so easy. Videogame consoles featured just one or two ports for controllers, leaving developers to come up with their own hardware solutions. Hudson's multitap enabled *Bomberman* to be played the way nature intended, while Codemasters used the ingenious J-Cart to get four (and later eight) Mega Drive players into *Micro Machines*. All this was rather expensive, of course, so it was a relief when Nintendo's N64 came with four controller ports as standard and ushered in a Golden Age of multiplayer gaming. Weirdly, Sony chose not to follow suit with PS2, even though it launched with a split-screen FPS from the *GoldenEye* team. Thankfully, a Sony multitap launched alongside it. Gathering friends around the same TV has become less common in the modern age, of course, but the advent of wireless controllers does at least allow four to eight players to connect to one console, just like the good old days.

ESSENTIAL TO:


● Super Smash Bros.


● Bomberman


● Timesplitters





Your favourite magazines n



3D Artist



Retro Gamer



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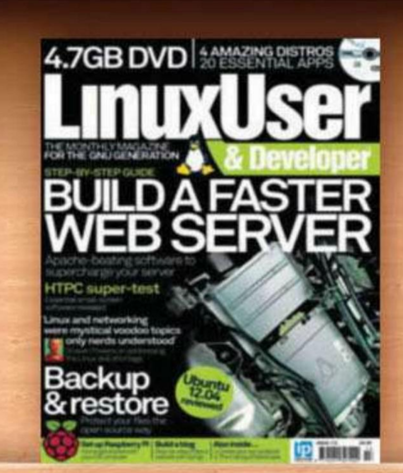
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ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BIGGEST VIDEOGAME SELL-OUTS

■ They've been interrupting TV shows, outstaying their welcome before big-screen movies and hawking wares between print and online articles for years, but now adverts have finally become commonplace in our games as well. As gaming audiences grow year-on-year, more advertisers look to virtual billboard and in-game sponsorship deals to ram their products down players' throats. A little product placement can add a sense of believability, familiarity and grounding to a game world if handled well, but, as the games on this rundown prove, the results are often as obnoxious as that klaxon-mouthed GoCompare guy.



Fight Night Round 3
Year: 2007
Product: Burger King

1 What professional athlete could possibly claim *not* to enjoy a tasty Whopper now and again? Certainly none of the stars of EA's next-gen boxing debut, that's for sure – with Burger King's big-headed mascot available as a coach (the best in the game, no less), we can safely assume that he spends the downtime between fights cramming soggy burgers down the training boxer's throat. It's not even The King's only gaming role – he appears in a generally dreadful trio of US-only Xbox advergames as well. Anyone else hungry?

Crazy Taxi
Year: 1999 **Product:** KFC, Levis, Tower Records, Pizza Hut

2 More grounded sandbox games like *The Getaway* might be able to get away with using real-world locations to make their streets more believable but, when you're careering around busy streets and flying over jumps in search of 'crazy money', it's hard to see familiar storefronts as anything more than colourful adverts for real things floating on a choppy ocean of fiction. Still, gamers of a certain age will likely have fond memories of virtual slackers demanding to be driven to the within-spitting-distance KFC – too bad the licensed stores were slashed from the downloadable ports along with the soundtrack.

Mick & Mack: Global Gladiators **Year:** 1992
Product: McDonalds

3 While The King uses the power of grilled meat to train world-class boxers, the ever-terrifying Ronald McDonald instead uses whatever power it is that scary clowns have to support two kids on a mission to save the environment. After being briefed by Commander Clown and equipped with gunge-lobbing water guns, the pair run along on their quest to collect a bunch of golden arches that definitely weren't something else entirely before Maccy D's threw some money at the game to get its name associated with its preachy message. Probably.

Doritos: Dash Of Destruction
Year: 2008 **Product:** Doritos

4 We've always thought that moreish tortilla snacks and cybernetic dinosaurs went hand in hand, so quite why it took so long for the two to coexist in a videogame is beyond our comprehension. Allowing players to take on either a rampaging crisp-hungry dino or the tormented delivery van in a twisted game of cat-and-mouse, the ropey game was notable primarily for offering a free 200 Gamerpoints. Follow-up *Crash Course* was a far more playable time attack platformer, even though it didn't have any dinosaurs in it.

Burnout Paradise
Year: 2008 **Product:** The Democratic Party

5 Just one of the many EA games to refresh in-game billboards based on information downloaded while online, *Burnout Paradise* managed to advertise not only products but people too. Well, a person. And not just *any* person, either – Criterion's racer played a part in championing and electing the most powerful man in the world. Barack Obama's face popped up on the game's advertising boards (no, not the ones you smash through) to promote his presidential campaign, despite the fact that the crazy streets of Paradise City were the last place we expected to find a blatant political message.



Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots
Year: 2008 **Product:** Apple

6 Despite being a super-sneaky badass dude, the sad truth is that Snake is a consumer whore. He can and will pimp anything from Mountain Dew and Axe deodorant (*Peace Walker*) to CalorieMate diet foods (*MGS3*), though it's in the series' PlayStation 3 debut that his true shill status is confirmed. Snake can fire up his iPod to listen to classic *MGS* tunes or podcasts for various bonus effects and collect more songs (which isn't how MP3 players work), while Otacon joins in the fun too by showing off his fancy MacBook Pro.

Alan Wake
Year: 2010
Product: Energizer batteries

7 Surely the first rule of product placement is that companies would want their goods to be reflected in a positive light? There's a list of games that run in the face of this commonsense assumption though, and *Alan Wake* sits near the top of the list. With light the only effective weapon against the Taken, Wake's torch is essential to his ongoing survival, though you had probably better stock up on those Energizer batteries you find lying around – turns out they're rubbish and last about five seconds.

EverQuest II
Year: 2004
Product: Pizza Hut

8 The worst thing about MMOs is clearly that frustrating downtime when you have to log out to go and find some real-world food so you don't die of starvation. Thank the maker for *EverQuest II*, then – an MMO so in touch with its hungry players that its creators struck a deal with Pizza Hut to facilitate the ordering of delicious cheese-and-tomato sustenance from within the game client. Laziness is great, isn't it?

Cool Spot
Year: 1993
Product: 7-Up

9 It'd be easy to lump *Cool Spot* in with the slew of shameless advergames that arrived around the same time, with many a crappy mascot getting an equally crappy 16-bit platformer to call their own. But the shades-toting platelet wasn't like the others, blessed as he was with a solid platform engine and a game that didn't ram its featured product down your throat – somewhat ironic considering it's just one big 7-Up advert.

Mafia II
Year: 2010
Product: Playboy

10 Forcing players to collect stuff for the sake of collecting stuff is one of gaming's worst habits (we're looking at you, *Assassin's Creed*, with your bloody flags and feathers). If you want to extend a game's lifespan, it's a good idea to make your collectibles worthwhile in some way. We were thinking more on a gameplay level actually, 2K, but we suppose liberally sprinkling your game with jazz mags will work too…

ESSENTIALS

TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE

> Mobile Games

ANGRY BIRDS SPACE - £0.69



Given that ten million of you managed to download this in the space of three days, it's unlikely that we really need to recommend Rovio's latest feathered frippery. To be fair, it's actually pretty good too, and far more inventive than something that will sell on name alone needs to be.

FLIGHT CONTROL ROCKET - £0.69



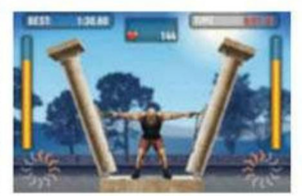
There's a lot to be said for the simplicity of *Flight Control*, so naturally this evolved version won't be to everyone's tastes. But with upgradeable characters and a fast-paced new setting, it's still something that can turn minutes into hours with ease. You have been warned.

DRAW SOMETHING - £0.69



Further proof that the simplest ideas are nearly always the best, this asynchronous *Pictionary*-esque drawing game is all the rage right now, and ties into your Facebook account to find opponents. It could do with a bigger vocabulary, but hey, they've got to save something for the sequel, right?

THE WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN - £1.99

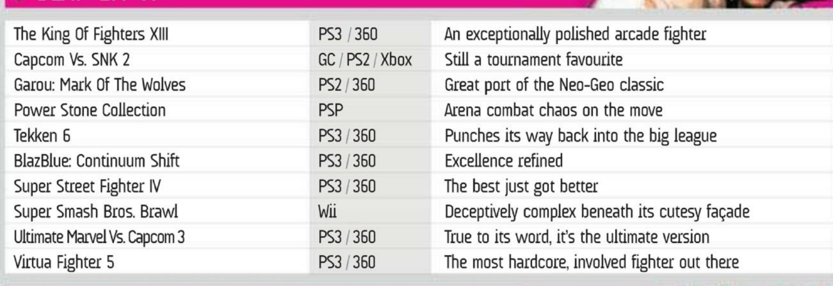


Experience the sensation of being a muscle-bound embodiment of physical perfection by furiously rubbing, tapping and swiping your iPad screen. It's *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* all over again, only instead of replacing a £10 joystick, you'll be replacing an iPad. So yeah, go easy.

MOTOHEROZ - £0.69



The Trials team works its magic on iOS once more, with a game far closer to its flagship franchise than last year's *1,000 Heroz*. It's a cutesy time-attack racer, with challenges and courses galore on which to prove your two-dimensional dominance over friends and rivals alike.



TITLE	FORMAT	VERDICT
ACTION/ADVENTURE		
BioShock	PC / PS3 / 360	One of the finest games of our time
Bayonetta	PS3 / 360	So long Capcom, hello Platinum Games
Uncharted 3	PS3	An adventure of epic scale, beautifully crafted
Batman: Arkham City	PC / PS3 / 360	A triumph in licensed videogames
Grand Theft Auto IV	PC / PS3 / 360	Open-world gameplay at its very finest
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword	Wii	An amalgam of everything great before it, this is near-perfect
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots	PS3	Arrogant yes, but absolutely lavish
Dead Space 2	PS3 / 360	Visceral redefines survival-horror
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood	PS3 / 360	Ubisoft's series reaches its pinnacle here
Super Mario Galaxy 2	Wii	Nintendo continues to show how it's done
BEAT-'EM-UP		
The King Of Fighters XIII	PS3 / 360	An exceptionally polished arcade fighter
Capcom Vs. SNK 2	GC / PS2 / Xbox	Still a tournament favourite
Garou: Mark Of The Wolves	PS2 / 360	Great port of the Neo-Geo classic
Power Stone Collection	PSP	Arena combat chaos on the move
Tekken 6	PS3 / 360	Punches its way back into the big league
BlazBlue: Continuum Shift	PS3 / 360	Excellence refined
Super Street Fighter IV	PS3 / 360	The best just got better
Super Smash Bros. Brawl	Wii	Deceptively complex beneath its cutesy façade
Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3	PS3 / 360	True to its word, it's the ultimate version
Virtua Fighter 5	PS3 / 360	The most hardcore, involved fighter out there
SHOOTERS		
Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	PC / PS3 / 360	Infinity Ward ends its trilogy with unparalleled bombast
Crysis	PC	A stunning experience worth upgrading your PC for
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	360	DICE stakes its claim on online shooter territory
Gears Of War 3	360	Closes the trilogy in epic Epic style
Halo: Reach	360	Bungie goes out with a bang
Vanquish	PS3 360	Fast, frenetic and fun
Left 4 Dead 2	PC / 360	One of the best co-op games, made better
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	Wii	Samus it ever was, but still wonderful
The Orange Box	PC / PS3 360	So much splendour crammed onto one disc
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl	PC	Action-orientated precursor to the mighty *Fallout 3*
ARCADE		
Super Meat Boy	Xbox 360, PC	2D platforming more or less perfected
Groove Coaster	iPhone/iPad	A rhythm-action gem that takes the genre back to its roots
Geometry Wars 2: Retro Evolved	360	The best score-attack game in recent memory
Ghost Squad	Wii	Coin-op shooter comes home in style
Gradius V	PS2	As stylish as it is traditional – a delight
Ikaruga	360	Treasure classic goes mainstream thanks to XBLA
Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan	DS	Devilishly tough and full of great tunes
Pac-Man: Championship Edition DX	360	A sterling update of the seminal maze muncher
Rez	PS2 / 360	Sega's glorious experiment in synaesthesia
We Love Katamari	PS2	The definitive collect-'em-up
PUZZLE		
Braid	360	Jonathon Blow's sublime time-control puzzler
Stacking	360 / PS3	Charming, whimsical and funny like only Double Fine can provide
Mr Driller: Drill Land	GC	Five great *Mr Driller* variants on one little disc
Portal 2	360/PS3/PC	Another ingenious entry from Valve
Professor Layton And The Curious Village	DS	Logic puzzles galore with sequels to come
Puzzle Quest: Challenge Of The Warlords	DS / PSP / 360	Splices puzzle and role-playing games to superb effect
Tetris DS	DS	Can you imagine a puzzle game rundown without it?
Trauma Center: Under The Knife	DS	The videogame equivalent of *Operation*, only fun
World Of Goo	PC / Wii	Blobs versus physics: it's more fun than it sounds...
Zack & Wiki: The Quest For Barbaros' Treasure	Wii	Quirky puzzle adventure that fits the Wii perfectly

TITLE	FORMAT	VERDICT
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES		
Heavy Rain	PS3	This difficult-to-categorise game-changer needs to be played
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	PC / PS3 / 360	A technical milestone, and breathlessly epic
Demon's Souls	PS3	The most innovative RPG of the decade
Fallout 3	PC / PS3 / 360	The classic series adapts miraculously to survive
Monster Hunter Tri	Wii	A hardcore game that anyone can enjoy
Xenoblade Chronicles	Wii	The finest JRPG in years and a Wii must-have
Mass Effect 2	PC / 360	A masterclass in game design
Pokémon Black/White	DS	The best collection of Pokémon in years
The World Ends With You	DS	Technical wizardry does justice to a great portable RPG
World Of Warcraft	PC	Still crippling the social lives of millions
RACING 		
Burnout 3: Takedown	PS2 / Xbox	More or less the perfect arcade racer
F-Zero GX	GC	Eye-melting speed over glorious courses – stunning
Mario Kart DS	DS	A multiplayer backup most DS owners should carry
Split/Second	PS3	The most incendiary racer in years
OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast	PS2 / Xbox	Even better than the arcade cabinet
Forza Motorsport 4	360	Turn 10's racer has now overtaken *Gran Turismo* in every way
Race Driver: Grid	PC / PS3 / 360	Encroaches on sim territory yet has something for everyone
Ridge Racer 2	PSP	The original was awesome and this is an improvement
Dirt 2	PS3 / 360 / PC	Codemasters finds the perfect line
WipEout 2048	PS Vita	Style and speed – meet *F-Zero*'s trendier brother
STRATEGY 		
Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten	PS3	Turns out SRPGs do get better
Football Manager 2009	PC	Showcases the strategic side of the sport
Empire: Total War	PC	Historical warfare on an epic scale
Naked War	PC	Interesting play-by-mail multiplayer conflict
Pikmin 2	GC	The little flower people grow even more fragrant
The Sims 3	PC / PS3 / 360	The ultimate virtual doll's house just got better
StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty	PC	The comeback hit PC gamers have been waiting for
Valkyria Chronicles	PS3	A thinking-man's game with fashion sense
World In Conflict	PC	A massively detailed alternative-history lesson
Worms 2: Armageddon	360	The best console version of *Worms* by far
PARTY 		
Dance Central 2	360	The king of pop games
Jam With The Band	DS	Eight players, one cart. That's a lot of noise…
DJ Hero	PS3 / 360 / Wii / PS2	A new spin on rhythm-action
Bomberman Generation	GC	The definitive frag-fest of recent years
LittleBigPlanet 2	PS3	An entire universe of homegrown possibilities
Ribbit King	GC / PS2	Borderline-broken but hilarious with company
Rock Band 3	PS3 / 360	Social gaming and rhythm-action perfection
Super Monkey Ball	GC	The minigames alone are worth the asking price
NEW Rhythm Heaven Fever	Wii	Inventive musical fun, now with multiplayer
Wii Sports Resort	Wii	Justifies the existence of MotionPlus within minutes
SPORTS 		
FIFA 12	PC / PS3 / Wii / 360	EA squeezes one past Konami as the title race hots up anew
EA Sports MMA	PS3 / 360	EA steals the crown from THQ
Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games	Wii	More exhausting than actual sport
NBA Live 10	PC / PS3 / Wii / 360	As good as virtual b-ball gets
NHL 12	PS3 / 360	A speedy alternative to a football game
Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis	PS3 / Wii / 360	Frantic, pleasantly surprising action
Skate 3	PS3 / 360	EA continues to show Hawk how it's done
SSX Tricky	GC / PS2 / Xbox	Riotous extremity from before the genre's decline
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09	PC / PS3 / Wii / 360	Minor update, but still sitting pretty
Virtua Tennis 3	PS3 / 360	Smashing arcade sports action

> Retro Downloads

DRAGON CRYSTAL 3DS VIRTUAL CONSOLE



This action-RPG surprised us when it was announced among the first wave of Virtual Console Game Gear titles – the screenshots brought fond memories flooding back, having not so much as thought about the early Roguelike adventure in years.

STRIDER VIRTUAL CONSOLE



Fresh from his return to the limelight in *Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3*, Capcom's acrobatic ninja chap sees his starring role reissued once more in the Wii's twilight. It's the Mega Drive version rather than the arcade original, though this shouldn't trouble anyone except die hard fans.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG: TRIPLE TROUBLE 3DS VIRTUAL CONSOLE



Celebrate Sonic's fall from grace by playing a game from around the very time it all started to go wrong. To make matters worse, Sega has levied a hefty Sonic Tax on the Game Gear title – it's almost twice the price of the far superior *Dragon Crystal*. Shameful.

ANACHRONOX PC



An ambitious but successful fusion of JRPG and western RPG sensibilities from *Deus Ex* developers Ion Storm, *Anachronox* might be showing its age a little these days but it's still an easy game to recommend…

DR MARIO 3DS VIRTUAL CONSOLE



The popular puzzle game makes its way onto the 3DS download service, something that would be all kinds of awesome if it weren't for the fact that *Tetris* is already available on the service. Still, fans of the plumber will make a case that there's room for both games and we'd be inclined to agree. Arguably worth it for the music alone.

contact

Enough of what we think – now you get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry. Or not...

For all your **games™** forum needs, point your browser to **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**





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Subject: **Micro Manage**
From: Gez Bennig

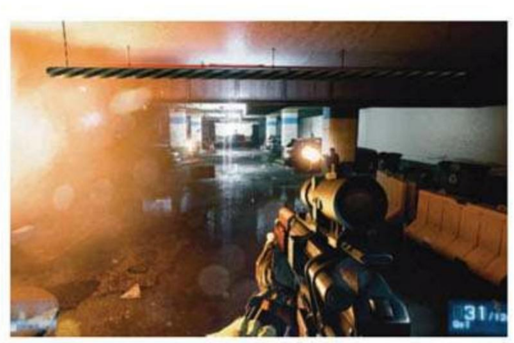
I'm becoming increasingly annoyed by microtransactions in full-priced games. Beyond the issue of on-disc DLC – which is deplorable in and of itself – many more games try to charge players extra money after they've spent upwards of 40 quid. Most recently, I've been playing *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13*, as I'm a longtime fan of the series. Admittedly, EA has offered players the chance to buy in-game items with real cash in previous editions, but the sheer wealth of content that can be unlocked with real money in the new version – circumventing the need to graft and improve the game altogether – is simply shocking. It reminds me of the sort of moronic asshole who spends a grand on clubs and clothes before they've ever set foot on a driving range. Is this really how EA sees its audience?

Like it or lump it, microtransactions are here to stay. It's a business model that EA has been quick to jump on board with, but it inevitably won't be long before we see the likes of *Call Of Duty* offering select rifle upgrades to those with fat wallets, as opposed to phat skillz.

Subject: **Couched**
From: George Pile

As a father, I really enjoy playing games with my eight-year-old son but I'm noticing a worrying lack of split-screen multiplayer games available across consoles. While games such as *Call Of Duty* and *Gears Of War* facilitate that desire for an older audience, there's a lack of variety outside of the innumerous sports and party games currently available. Has online gaming made local multiplayer an outdated concept?

Unfortunately, offline multiplayer is something that has been neglected by some developers this generation but there are still a few stand-out titles, particularly in the family market. The Wii is full of such titles, from *Smash Bros.*, to *Wii Sports* to *Mario Party*, while PlayStation 3 of course has *LittleBigPlanet*. As devs get to grips with Kinect, expect to see more offline multiplayer games there too.



Should EA be charging fans for use of dedicated servers, just to access elite game modes? Well, if there's money involved it can't be wrong, right?

Subject: **Mass Disappointment**
From: Sam Roscoe

Given the hugely overblown reaction to the *Mass Effect 3* ending – in which the previous one hundred hours of brilliance is seemingly negated by an arguably disappointing final forty minutes – I'd be interested in **games™**'s thoughts on the possibility of BioWare changing the conclusion. Personally I thought it was a good demonstration of how subtlety and ambiguity can actually work in a gaming context, but it was the wrong ending for the series – at the last hurdle, BioWare placed the solid but not brilliant plot ahead of characterisation; much of the backlash would probably have been

> It was the wrong ending for the series – at the last hurdle, BioWare placed the solid but not brilliant plot ahead of characterisation
> Sam Roscoe

avoided had a *Fallout*-style endgame 'slideshow' been provided to show for definite what happened to Shepard's crew. One would hope that if the developer does change the ending, it will be of their own volition, rather than giving in to wrongheaded criticism. It would have been nice to settle down with Tali and go fishing with Garrus, but this was BioWare's art, and thus it was their right to end it how they did. The series, more than any other title apart from the superlative *Deadly Premonition*, has demonstrated that games can tell a story and make us care about characters – and due respect should be given for this accomplishment.

Given the magnum opus that BioWare has crafted over the course of three games, there was no doubt that the ending would polarise fans to some degree. However, if you'll indulge us while we put our cynical hat on: given the post-release DLC that followed *Mass Effect 2*, there's little question that BioWare has plans in place to enlighten the events of the end with some extended content (that would likely take place just prior to the end chapter). But given the overwhelming hotheaded reactions of a generation of gamers with an alarming sense of entitlement, BioWare may just tweak the content to prove more conclusive, rather than allusive – which, in our mind, would be for shame.



■ *Mass Effect 3*'s ending has been harshly critised by the fan community. BioWare has confirmed a DLC epilogue will arrive in the summer as a mea culpa.

Subject: **Down Time**
From: Leeray666

During a recent server update on 20 March, *Battlefield 3* players were gifted with four new server options. These servers host a new themed map/game rotation. 'Epic Battles' for example, comprised of six of the largest vehicle-heavy maps in the conquest game mode. Others included a mix of rush, conquest and team deathmatch modes. These new servers were a surprise to everyone, and it was even hinted – until the next day when the server names had changed – that the server update had somehow glitched and that this was all a mistake.

One major issue arose, though. The people who had played the game on hardcore mode – many of whom had done so for the six months of the game's release – were now left with these servers being their ONLY option, as there are no EA servers on Hardcore mode. This means they are no longer able to play Metro on conquest (one of the most popular maps) or to be able to play the game mode Squad Rush at all.

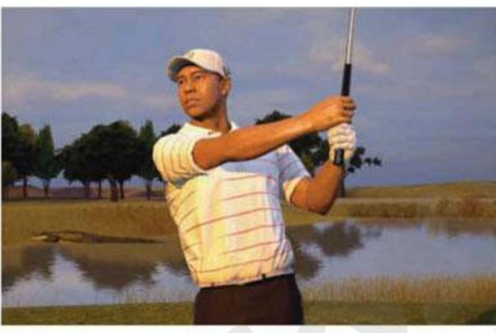
Since that day, the hardcore community has pushed DICE and EA to bring back at least some of the servers, but have yet only received vague and evasive responses. Soon after, a new patch for the game was released. This patch enabled people to finally rent servers for private matches, or to play the game tweaked to their liking. This itself is causing concern and not just among the hardcore gaming community.

For the hardcore community, the whole business is a cynical attempt to just make more money; one in which EA and DICE are hoping the community will pay for their own servers just to be able to play the old maps and rotations they had for free not so long ago.

What concerns the normal mode players, however, is the disappearance of the EA servers on their side. What seems to be happening is EA is selling off its servers – the ones with the old maps/rotations – for private use, leaving the standard player with less choice. In fact, some have since suggested that they can now no longer find any of the EA servers in the server browser on normal mode. This leaves them in the same boat as the hardcore players. Do they hop onto a rented server hoping not to get kicked? Or do they rent their own server to play conquest only, or do they play one of the new free servers and be forced into games of rush or team deathmatch?

Is this the future? A future where games companies give with one hand, and take away with another, only to demand further payment in order to get it back? Will it be the weapons or the vehicles next? Or will this whole thing be deemed an innocent mistake and straightened out in a future patch?

It's an extension of the microtransaction model that EA is so fond of at the moment. Here's a rule of thumb: if there's money to be made exploiting ancillary features that the majority of players don't consider standard, then expect some corporation to wring the pennies out of susceptible consumers.



■ *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13* may have taken the concept of microtransactions too far. And we thought Mr. Woods was as such an upstanding gentleman.



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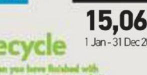
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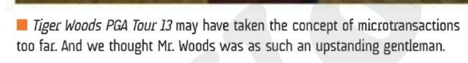
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15,066
1 Jan - 31 Dec 2011



Release List

Calm your anticipation with our list of forthcoming releases

Bargain Basement

The best deals this month



YAKUZA: DEAD SOULS

Format: PS3 **Where:** zavvi.com

The odd *Yakuza* spin-off is already down to less than half price if you shop around – it's silly, sure, but worth a punt at that kind of price.



CHILD OF EDEN

Format: Xbox 360 **Where:** play.com

If you're dusting off your Kinect to pretend you're wielding a lightsaber, do yourself a favour and grab this while you're at it. It's a real, working videogame.



FINAL FANTASY XIII-2

Format: Multi
Where: thegamecollection.net

The original game split the *FF* hardcore down the middle but this follow-up was far better received, and rightly so – it's an awesome JRPG.



HUNTED: THE DEMON'S FORGE

Format: Xbox 360
Where: thegamecollection.net

It's not the greatest of adventures, but now it's under a tenner it's far easier to recommend. Just don't go expecting *Gears* levels of polish.

Check out the bargains thread at www.gamestm.co.uk/forum for bang-up-to-date deals. Your find could well feature on these hallowed pages.

*Although these prices are correct at the time of writing, retailers are a fickle bunch and these deals are subject to change at any time.

MAY

15 May	Diablo III	PC
18 May	Max Payne 3	PC, PS3, 360
25 May	Atelier Meruru: The Apprentice of Arland	PS3
25 May	DiRT Showdown	PC, PS3, 360
25 May	Dragon's Dogma	PS3, 360
25 May	Risen 2: Dark Waters	PS3 360
25 May	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	PS3, 360
TBC	Myst	3DS

JUNE

1 Jun	Resistance: Burning Skies	PSV
1 Jun	Summer Stars 2012	PS3, Wii, 360
8 Jun	Inversion	PS3, 360
15 Jun	Lollipop Chainsaw	PS3, 360
22 Jun	Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	PC, PS3, PSV, 360, Wii
22 Jun	Pokémon Conquest	DS
29 Jun	The Amazing Spider-Man	PS3, 360
29 Jun	Darksiders II	PC, PS3, 360
29 Jun	Summer Stars 2012	PS3, Wii, 360
15 Jun	Lollipop Chainsaw	PS3, 360
29 Jun	Darksiders II	PC, PS3, 360
29 Jun	Spec Ops: The Line	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	London 2012: The Official Video Game	PC, PS3, 360

Q2 2012

TBC	Akai Katana	360
TBC	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Deadlight	360
TBC	Dust 514	PS3, PSV
TBC	Game Of Thrones	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Gravity Rush	PSV
TBC	Jet Set Radio	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Kinect Nat Geo TV	360
TBC	Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance	3DS
TBC	Mario Tennis	3DS

RECOMMENDED



Pokémon Conquest

Format: DS **Publisher:** Nintendo

We called it last issue, and while Nintendo has gone with *Conquest* rather than *Tactics* for the title, we still couldn't be happier that it's coming.



Akai Katana

Format: Xbox 360 **Publisher:** Rising Star Games

Rising Star picks up another Cave shooter for the Western market, though the hardcore have probably had the Japanese version for years.



Paper Mario

Format: 3DS **Publisher:** Nintendo

Intelligent Systems flattens the plumber again, the lower screen used for RPG numbers while the top screen adds depth to the pop-up world.



Sorcery

Format: PlayStation 3 **Publisher:** Sony

Move's killer app was announced at E3 last year, but nothing has been heard since. Here's hoping no news is good news.

FORWARD THINKING | You'll definitely want these



NI NO KUNI: WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Namco Bandai

It's hardly surprising that this Level-5/Studio Ghibli collaboration has slipped into next year – JRPGs are infamously time-consuming to translate. Still, hopefully it'll be worth the wait. More soon.



HALO 4

Format: Xbox 360
Publisher: Microsoft

Master Chief returns to finish the fight he said he was going to finish two games ago, but will this be 360's swansong, or the game to breathe life into the Microsoft machine and buy this generation another year or two?



UK MULTIFORMAT CHART



1 FIFA STREET
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

2 MASS EFFECT 3
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

3 TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 13
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

4 RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACOON CITY
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Capcom

5 FIFA 12
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

6 NARUTO SHIPPUDEN NINJA STORM GENERATIONS
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Namco Bandai

7 CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 3
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Activision

8 BATTLEFIELD 3
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

9 MARIO & SONIC LONDON 2012 OLYMPIC GAMES
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Sega

10 SSX
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Electronic Arts

RECOMMENDED



Virtual Fighter 5: Final Showdown
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Sega

Yes, this was featured last month. We don't care. In fact, we'll remind you every issue until it's out.



Borderlands 2
Format: Multi **Publisher:** 2K Games

Because sometimes a bazillion guns just isn't enough. Expect more weapon varieties and more co-op craziness come September.



Dead Or Alive 5
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Tecmo Koei

We're intrigued to see how cinematic Team Ninja pushes this, though the core fighting engine is enough to keep us on board for now.



Tomb Raider
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Square Enix

Lara's comeback draws ever closer, this origin story hopefully explaining exactly why she and the pyramid-headed T-Rex never saw eye to eye.

Q2 2012

TBC	Mortal Kombat	PSV
TBC	Overstrike	3DS
TBC	Paper Mario	3DS
TBC	Persona 4 Arena	PS3, 360
TBC	Rock Band Blitz	PS3, 360
TBC	Rocksmith	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	The Secret World	PC
TBC	Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Sorcery	PS3
TBC	Spirit Camera: The Cursed Memory	3DS
TBC	StarHawk	PS3
TBC	Star Trek	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Super Monkey Ball: Banana Splitz	PSV
TBC	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD	PS3, 360
TBC	Transformers: Fall Of Cybertron	PS3, 360
TBC	Virtual Fighter 5: Final Showdown	PS3, 360

Q3 2012

TBC	Far Cry 3	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Borderlands 2	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Aliens: Colonial Marines	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Anarchy Reigns	PS3, 360
TBC	Animal Crossing	3DS
TBC	BioShock Infinite	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Brothers In Arms: Furious 4	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Dead Or Alive 5	PS3, 360
TBC	Dishonored	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Hitman Absolution	PS3, 360
TBC	Pokémon Black/White Version 2	DS
TBC	Prey 2	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Resident Evil 6	PS3, 360
TBC	Sleeping Dogs	PS3, 360
TBC	South Park: The Game	PS3, 360
TBC	Tomb Raider	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	War Of The Roses	PC

IMPORT WATCH

STEINS;GATE
Format: PS3 **Publisher:** 5pb

The popular visual novel finally arrives on PlayStation 3, the region-free nature of the Sony machine meaning that overseas players can finally import freely.



HEROES OF RUIN
Format: 3DS **Publisher:** Square Enix

The 3DS is pretty light on action RPGs at the moment, so Square Enix's foray into said gap is welcome indeed. It's out in the States now too, import fans.



TOKYO JUNGLE
Format: PS3 **Publisher:** Sony

Featuring amazing box art and the ability to customise your animals with outfits and silly hats, we can't think of a single valid reason *not* to import *Tokyo Jungle*. Get on it.



GRAVITY RUSH
Format: PS Vita **Publisher:** Sony

It's the Vita game everyone is waiting on. Grab the US version early if you want to show off to your mates.



DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: TERRY NO WONDERLAND 3D
Format: 3DS **Publisher:** Square Enix

Get ready for the 3DS to become Japan's favourite console as it gets *Dragon Quest* – better pre-order if you're planning on importing.



LUIGI'S MANSION 2
Format: 3DS
Publisher: Nintendo

The GameCube launch title gets an unexpected sequel, though we're glad to be offered the opportunity to hear Luigi hum along with the instrumental score and cry out for his brother with a quiver in his voice. Such a baby, but you gotta love him.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Rockstar Games

As usual for Rockstar, there's been bugger all on the *GTA* front since its announcement trailer. However, you can expect all that to change in May, when the company shoos *Max Payne 3* out the door and needs something else to shout about.



games™ industry >>

LOOKING BEYOND THE GAMES AT THE INNER WORKINGS OF THE BUSINESS

BY GEORGE!

Page 164

CATCHING A BREAK

>> Following the announcement of tax breaks for UK videogame developers, games™ talks to leading industry luminaries across Britain about the potential impact of the initiative

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A Moment With… GameFly

>> GameFly co-founder Sean Spector discusses the distribution service's arrival in the UK



Page 168

A Moment With… Hello Games

>> The indie studio behind Joe Danger talks franchise stagnation and impossible stunts



BUDGET REPORT:

TAX BREAKS FOR UK DEVELOPERS

*The government's latest budget report revealed the long-awaited tax breaks that UK videogame developers have sought after for years. **games™** investigates how these proposed benefits will affect the industry in the foreseeable future*









"THIS IS justification for our stance over the past four years," says a jubilant Dr Richard Wilson, hours after Chancellor George Osborne announced the budget report for 2012. In the statement, the Chancellor of the Exchequer outlined massive steps towards growth within the UK games sector, declaring tax breaks awarded to developers that will take effect from April 2013. It comes as blessed relief to TIGA, the trade association that has been campaigning both "aggressively and tenaciously" for the government to impose a tax credit on behalf of its members for the better part of a decade. Its proposals had previously garnered support from the preceding Labour government, but were scrapped when the Coalition Government entered Downing Street, cited as being "poorly targeted" to be truly effective and beneficial to the economy. But after years of false starts, disingenuous proclamations from various departmental ministers and the unfortunate closure of some of the UK's brightest developers, change is finally underway.

January's announcement of a Computer Science education overhaul can be seen as one significant step in shifting Westminster's archaic attitude towards the industry. Now, after the combined backing of UKIE, Ian Livingstone and minister for the department of culture, media and sport Ed Vaizey, alongside TIGA's efforts, the Chancellor has acknowledged the need for policy change. "This is recognition of the great work that is being done by the UK's independent games developers," says Wilson. "If there wasn't a strong collection of UK developers working hard to design and build games for all platforms, this tax break would not have happened. We have some great talent in the UK both in terms of creatives and programmers, that have already combined to produce top sellers such as online game *RuneScape* and *Sniper Elite*. The Chancellor has recognised the potential of our industry and has backed it."

THE ACTIONS of the Chancellor suggest that the government's myopic outlook has changed, and the industry is now viewed as many others have seen it for a number of years, as holding the potential to boost and significantly contribute to the UK economy in the future. Ian Livingstone's heartfelt post on the BBC News website underlined the thoughts of many leading industry

■ Media Molecule is just one of 300 UK videogame development studios that will benefit from the new tax breaks.



figures that, with the correct financial incentives, inward investment and job creation, the UK industry could "reclaim its position as a world leader in games production." However, it'll still be a long time before any significant effects will be felt, as the initiative is gradually introduced over the next twelve months.

But it's clear to see what the expected long-term benefits will be, with TIGA CEO Dr Richard Wilson estimating that in "over five years the 'TIGA Tax Relief' will generate 4,660 highly skilled jobs and £188 million in investment in the sector." The statistics are hugely encouraging, nurturing a sustainable studio sector for the future and, as Wilson puts it, support "developers as they make the transition to self-publishing."

And while it's likely to secure the success of emerging studios, ensure a boon in creativity and further drive innovation on multiple digital platforms, it'll also present major advantages for established developers already working within the constraints of the UK system. "Beyond the potential financial benefits (reducing the cost of games development allowing us to invest more in our industry), this tax relief will create greater stability and enable UK companies to provide a more appealing industry to work in, retaining more talent in Britain," says Blitz Games Studio's CEO, Philip Oliver. "It's certainly been a long time coming."

> "It will go a long way towards levelling the global playing field when it comes to the cost of making games"
> Philip Oliver, Blitz Games

THE GOVERNMENT dragging its feet is a sentiment shared across the industry on the matter; the UK has had to labour on while burdened with high production costs, making it one of the most expensive regions for game production. When it's compared to countries such as France, Australia and the US, all of which offer various incentives to help finance and subsidise their industries, then it puts into perspective the injustice felt over the years by industry commentators.

"Quebec, for example, offers a 37.5 per cent salary rebate to employers for staff making videogames," Livingstone states in his BBC News post. "France offers a 20 per cent tax credit." It's only with the measures announced in the Chancellor's budget report, many developers feel, that the UK will emerge on an even keel with its international counterparts. It should dispense with the intense pressure of a 'sell or die' industry within the UK that has witnessed reputable studios such as Black Rock, Realtime Worlds and Bizarre Creations close down after average sales and increasing overheads mounted to a breaking point where it was no longer financially feasible to continue operations.

"It will go a long way towards levelling the global playing field when it comes to the cost of making games in the UK, especially with those countries which are already heavily subsidised by their governments," muses Oliver. "Effectively developers in the UK will be able to bid more competitively for more projects. Also, the 'brain drain' of UK talent relocating to these other subsidised countries will hopefully lessen and enable us to continue to punch above our weight on the world stage."

Nothing is certain, however, and with legal hoops to jump through and EU approval needed before it is officially sanctioned, this proposal by the government may not even come to fruition. But for now it represents a potential turning point, and the promise of a new golden age of homegrown development that should firmly place the UK at the forefront of the industry. "Today is like a London Bus day for the games industry," Livingstone closed his BBC News entry with. "Nothing for years and suddenly computer science in schools, super-fast broadband and tax breaks all come along at once."



Black Rock Studio is just one of a number of high-profile developers which might have benefitted from tax breaks if they had been introduced before they were forced to close.

INDUSTRY REACTIONS

UK DEVELOPERS TALK TO GAMES™

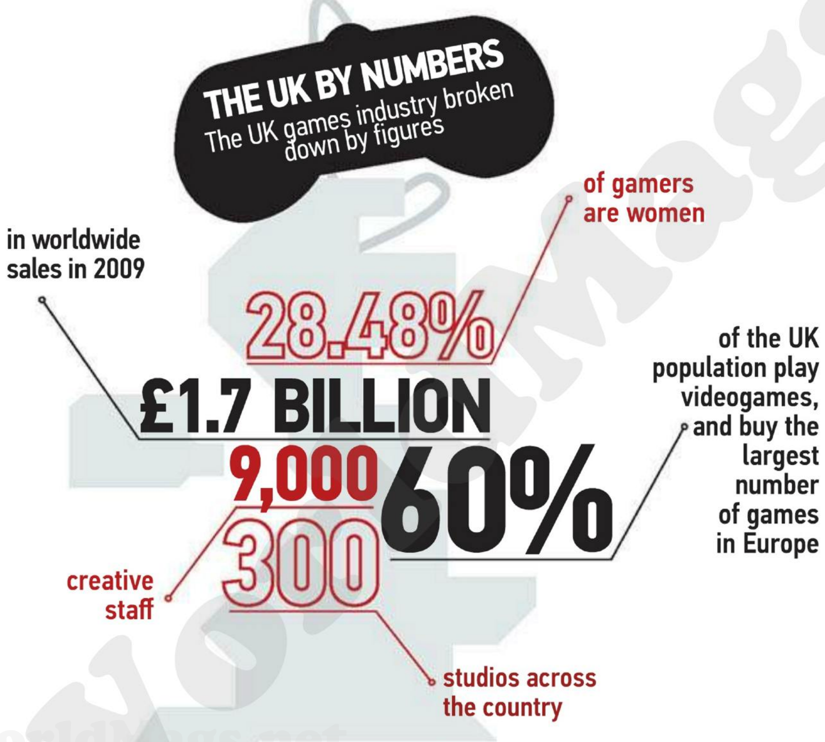
"IF DESIGNED correctly it should make a very big difference to the UK. The worldwide games industry will continue to go on from strength to strength, but we will see less of it leaving the country, and perhaps a fair amount coming back as 'outsourcing' is reduced, and the work done in the UK instead."

David Braben, **Frontier**

"IDEALLY, I believe no country should be offering 'special deals' and we should all compete on our merits and skill base, but, as long as there is inconsistency and distortion in the marketplace, then the UK needs to react to that. This is hopefully a positive reaction."



Karl Hilton, **Crytek UK**



A MOMENT WITH…

GAMEFLY

KEY FIGUREHEADS

- David Hodess
- Sean Spector
- Jung Suh

ACQUISITIONS



>> Shacknews
[2009]



>> Direct2Drive
[2011]

>> A prominent rental and digital distribution firm in the US for the past ten years, GameFly recently acquired Direct2Drive in a move to dominate the UK digital marketplace. Co-founder Sean Spector discusses the company's next twelve months as the business moves into the UK



SEAN SPECTOR

GameFly acquired online download service Direct2Drive in May 2011, gaining over 300 publishers with the takeover – how do you plan to capitalise on Direct2Drive's market share?

>> For most publishers Steam was obviously number one when it came to digital, but Direct2Drive was number two. It was a distant number two – I'm not going to claim it wasn't – but for most publishers it was the number two outlet. Over time Amazon and Origin appeared, and I really view the four of us as the leaders in the market in terms of both scale and brand awareness. For us, we don't believe it's 'one winner takes all', we believe that there are some people who don't like and are uncomfortable with those other platforms and we give consumers choice. We believe this is sort of the beginning, and Steam has a head start but there's still a long way to go. Consumers win when they have choice and we want to be one of their choices.

OnLive launched in the UK in 2011, but so far it has failed to gain a strong market foothold. Did you learn anything from its business strategy?

>> Streaming, in my opinion, is interesting and will become interesting over time, but just isn't ready for primetime. There are pieces of it that make sense – for a quick demo or thirty minutes of gameplay – but to stream *Skyrim* for two hundred hours spread over three months… your bandwidth provider wouldn't be happy. We do think it's interesting, though and we're talking with Gaikai about doing something in the future. Their approach makes more sense to us.

As a relatively unknown name in the UK, you've folded an established brand into your company. Did you ever consider keeping hold of the Direct2Drive name rather than transitioning over to GameFly?

>> Whenever you change or modify your brand it's a difficult decision. You've got to weigh the pros and the cons, and in the long term the pros of having one consistent brand with one consistent message makes sense. Also, we always believed in a really strong retail experience, and in our opinion Direct2Drive was fine but it wasn't great. Starting fresh we can become great, versus taking over D2D and having to change [the public's] perceptions.

Do you see an end to bricks-and-mortar specialist high street videogame stores, given the recent troubles faced by Game in the UK?

>> It's not too dissimilar to things that have happened in the US. I'm not an expert on the situation here, but it could be a perfect storm of things. It could be a combination of digital being more popular, people being more comfortable shopping online and Game having too many stores. Now, I don't think that the physical disc is going away any time soon. People are going to go somewhere to buy them. The question is: where and how?

You mentioned that GameFly will actively promote indie games through the interface – are you working with any independent UK studios at the moment?

>> If you've got any developers that are readers then they should reach out to us. We have a team dedicated to content acquisition and, while they're looking at EA and Activision, they're always hunting out the little guys as well.



Visit the website at www.gamefly.co.uk



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A MOMENT WITH...

HELLO GAMES

KEY FIGUREHEADS

- Sean Murray
- Grant Duncan
- Ryan Doyle
- David Ream

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS


>> Burnout 3
Multi [2004]


>> Black
Multi [2006]


>> Burn Zombie Burn
Multi [2009]



>> Joe Danger
Multi [2010]

>> Hello Games burst onto the indie scene with the irresistible and addictive Joe Danger on PSN. Awards and accolades ensued. As the developer continues work on the sequel, Joe Danger: The Movie, gamesTM chats to co-founder Sean Murray about what's next for the studio


Sean Murray

After founding the company for *Joe Danger*, what informed the decision to go straight to a sequel? Was there a sense of striking while the iron was hot instead of moving onto a new project?

>> Basically, we're not going to do a *Joe Danger 3*. We've all said that at the studio. We've said to each other that if we have an idea for this game then we have got to put it in *now*. In a way, that's quite a nice feeling. It's going out the door and we're saying goodbye to it – we're never going to get to do this game again. It's kind of scary but there's a freedom to it as well.

Was it a case of making a game that you always intended the first one to be – the *Evil Dead 2* approach of a sequel via a remake?

>> The main impetus behind doing a sequel was because when the original went out the door, we only finished it because we basically ran out of money! It actually killed us to release it as it was. I've said that before elsewhere and people in the comments section were like, 'Oh, thanks for your unfinished game!' It was well received, though, and we're not making the sequel out of greed or anything like that. With the original it was tough to let it go, admitting that we had to abandon it eventually.

Ultimately, you never finish a piece of work, you just have to send it out there. But we always wanted to do a sequel, we always wanted to revisit it and to put in all these ideas that we had with the first game. We finally made the game we always set out to do now and were able to put all this stuff that we wanted to put in. It enabled us to make a much fuller experience. The truth is, we never thought that *Joe Danger* would be received well enough for us to do that.

How did you react to the overwhelming positive reaction the original *Joe Danger* received?

>> I would imagine anyone goes through this when you create something and you put it out there: you're immediately not happy with it. You then start to see things that don't quite work and you begin to think it's just plain awful and people will laugh at it. You've done your best but you just think that everyone else is better than you. So, yeah, it's been real nice that it has been so well received.

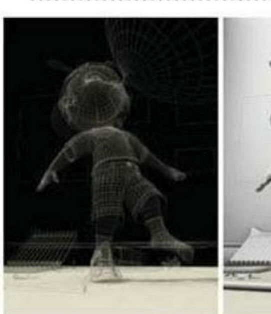
And now that you're a more established studio, have you expanded the workforce at all?

>> Originally there were four of us, then a few more have joined since then, but we're still small. Super-small, in fact, and that's our choice. Before [the size of the team] was by necessity and we would've taken anyone who would work with us, but for now we like to keep it the way it is.



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games™
MMO
The essential guide to the online gaming universe
WORLDS
174 PREVIEWED
EVE ONLINE: INFERNO
A new expansion pushes CCP even further into deep space
175 INTERVIEWED
MECHANIST GAMES
The lead designer spills the beans on the studio's steampunk MMO
PHANTASY STAR ONLINE 2
Can Sega's popular franchise bring console-style MMO gaming to the masses?

It's still in closed beta right now, but *PSO2* looks absolutely stunning already. Keep those fingers crossed for Sega to wake up and announce a global release...

Phantasy Star Online 2 Cross-Platform Hunting

SEGA RETIRES THE HUNTER'S LICENCE AS THE ORIGINAL CONSOLE MMO GOES FREE-TO-PLAY AND MULTIFORMAT

It might not fit into the common MMO definition particularly comfortably, but for years *Phantasy Star Online* was the closest thing to a traditional online role-playing game that many console gamers would see. While adventuring limited parties to just four members, social lobbies could house many more for either chatting or mission prep, and it's here that Sega's game fell closest to the booming PC genre. The Japanese Dreamcast version and later ports of the game sailed even closer to MMO waters, demanding paid subscription in order to enjoy the online experience. While console MMOs might not be so alien a concept these days, that hasn't stopped Sega from taking a few pointers from the leading names in the MMO market in reviving the series proper.

Spin-offs such as the *Phantasy Star Portable* games have been hugely popular in Japan, the huge PSP install base (courtesy of *Monster Hunter*, it's fair to say) allowing the franchise to flourish despite not having seen a true *Phantasy Star Online* outing since 2004... and even that was a strange card-battling game. But with its Hunters seemingly tired of living in the shadows of Capcom's, *PSO*'s return will be surrounded by major changes and franchise firsts in a bid to promote the grandfather of a genre back to the top of its game.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC, PS Vita, iOS
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: Japan
RELEASE: 2012



The first and arguably most important of these changes concerns pricing – or, more specifically, a lack thereof. Gone are the days of a Hunter's License being a toll booth that stands between eager players and online fun – the PC version will apparently be both free to download and to play, with revenue coming from the F2P staple of cash shops and microtransactions. With so many leading MMOs moving towards this business model (or at least offering it as a content-restricted alternative to paid subscriptions), it's hardly a major shock to see Sega cast its net as wide as this. Not only is the PC market bursting with surprisingly accomplished freebies but *PSO* will also be looking to persuade the *Monster Hunter* crowd to put down their PSPs and Wii Remotes and jump on the computer. Well, either that or reach for a Vita.

IN A FIRST for the series – and a move only so far equalled by *Final Fantasy XI* – *Phantasy Star Online 2* will be only the second online RPG to offer cross-platform play between PC and console players. It's unclear at this time whether the Vita version will follow exactly the same business model as its PC big brother, though it will at least be free to play – a free download would naturally help its cause though there's no real precedent for such a bold move, perhaps with the exception of Sony's free release of its own *Free Realms* on PS3. Player data will be stored server-side, which is a decision with numerous benefits. For one, it should help quell the rife cheating and hacking seen in earlier versions of the game, but moreover



Character creation tools are far deeper than ever before in the series, which will prove important once those cross-platform lobbies start to fill up.

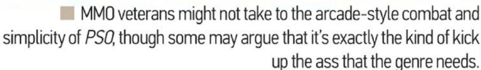
The Vita version is more cluttered with icons and such but, with almost a year of development left, expect it to be streamlined before launch.

"Phantasy Star Online 2 will be only the second online RPG to offer cross-platform play between PC and console players"









MMO veterans might not take to the arcade-style combat and simplicity of *PSO*, though some may argue that it's exactly the kind of kick up the ass that the genre needs.

it'll really drive home the cross-platform support, as players will be able to sign out of their game on PC and pick up exactly where they left of on the move courtesy of the PlayStation Vita version.

One thing the doubting crowd has been quick to pick up on is that the Vita build shown recently looks significantly worse than its PC counterpart – not something we'd expect when games like *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* have proven the new handheld's impressive power. The reason for this, it emerged, is that *PSO2* is very much in its infancy on Vita – the PC servers are all but ready for the game to roll out (with stress tests of 100,000-odd users ongoing at the time of going to print) but the Vita version was cited as being around ten per cent complete, and not due to launch until early next year. So while right now it might be comparable to the PC version's lowest graphical detail settings, the complete and fully optimised build will reportedly give the maxed-out PC version a run for its money. We very much look forward to seeing if this lofty claim can be backed up.

What we look forward to even more, however, is for Sega to have the revelation that people outside of Japan might want to return to the *Phantasy Star Online* universe, especially considering it's going to be free. The game (in all its guises) is currently only slated for a Japanese release, though we fully expect that to change in the future – the very nature of a microtransaction-fuelled business model means that the game needs to be in the hands of as many players as possible in order to turn a healthy profit, after all...

PHANTASY STAR MINI

Alongside the announcement that *PSO2* would be coming to Vita, Sega also revealed that there will be a version of the game created exclusively for smartphones, with both iOS and Android support confirmed. Understandably, it's not the same full-featured game as the two main versions – instead, it's a simplified touch-centric variant that uses server-stored player data from the full game in order to offer more of a companion piece. It'll be interesting to see just how deep the connection between the two versions runs in the end – similar systems have been employed successfully in the past by the likes of *Fable*'s Kingmaker app – but while we might have preferred for the mobile *PSO2* to turn out to be portable gaming's first must-have MMO, it looks as though that honour will be claimed instead by the Vita version.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARK MILLENNIUM 'REFOCUSED'



THQ has announced that its upcoming *40k* game will no longer be an MMO – the project is being refocused as a single-player experience with online elements, with the downsizing of the projects leading to over 100 job losses across both Relic Entertainment and Vigil Games.

KAROS ONLINE CLOSES



The sun has set on F2P fantasy MMO *Karos Online* after a decent two-year run, though all is not lost for those that sank months into their characters – anyone looking to continue the legacy of their *Karos* heroes can carry over account information to *Rosh Online*, which will also offer some manner of compensation for riches and trinkets lost in the move.

MENACE OF THE UNDERDARK COMING JUNE 25



The next expansion for *Dungeons & Dragons Online* is set to arrive next month, dragging the game into the Forgotten Realms setting and adding oodles of new content – fresh dungeons, instances, public areas and random encounters are introduced, with *Menace Of The Underdark* also offering a new class in the Druid and more opportunities to face off against powerful dragons.

DRAKENSANG PASSES FIVE MILLION MILESTONE



It might still be in beta but Bigpoint's MMO has attracted five million registered players since the open beta began in August last year. It's a promising sign for the free-to-play RPG, which continues to grow larger and more popular with each new content drop.



Nine years is a long time, but CCP has taken pains to keep *Eve* looking amazing, even as PC technology increases exponentially.



The rollout of Crimewatch is hoped to cut down the level of griefing that goes on in the famously unmoderated, largely corruption-fuelled world of *Eve*.





Imagine docking your ship and wandering onto something as hulking as this monster. It could raise levels of immersion within *Eve* beyond anything yet seen.

Eve Online: Inferno

CCP REIGNITES ITS MMO UNIVERSE

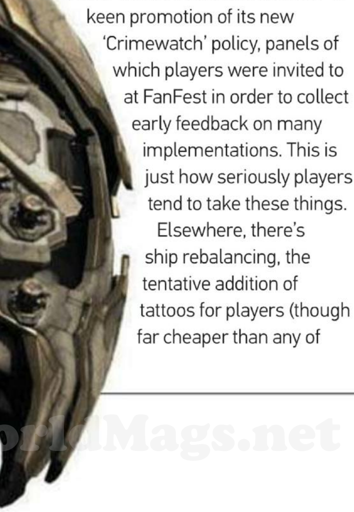
FanFest 2012 saw the introduction of CCP's latest expansion to the *Eve* universe. While always an important event in the life of the MMO, *Eve*'s updates have felt particularly under scrutiny over the past few months in the wake of a 2011 in which many fans considered the developer was beginning to lose its way. What exactly CCP wanted *Eve*, which launched in 2003, to become as it evolved was called into question as bangles and baubles seemed to start outweighing gameplay innovation.

Happily, *Inferno* seems more in the vein of November 2011's *Crucible* update, with a focus on the nuts and bolts of the universe in terms of ships, weapons and economy, as opposed to the pervading memories of *Incarna* in Summer 2011.

The so-called 'Monoclegate', after all, cost CCP a goodly percentage of its players, and provoked genuine fears among the fanbase that CCP would now rather fill its universe with overpriced virtual trousers than keep on deepening *Eve*'s real strength (for those with the patience to embrace it); the pull of its highly cerebral gameplay elements.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: CCP Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: Iceland
RELEASE: 22 May
PRICE: Free



Inferno, then, is more a selection of tools, options and tweaks to facilitate a smoother and more varied online experience. It's arguable, however, that CCP already has its hands full winning new audiences with *Dust 514*, which soon launches free-to-play on PSN.

/// **ONE PARTICULAR FOCUS** with *Inferno* is to nourish the popular player versus player scene within *Eve*, altering the rules on PvP combat, particularly in high-security regions of space. Much of it comes in line with CCP's keen promotion of its new 'Crimewatch' policy, panels of which players were invited to at FanFest in order to collect early feedback on many implementations. This is just how seriously players tend to take these things.

Elsewhere, there's ship rebalancing, the tentative addition of tattoos for players (though far cheaper than any of *Incarna*'s fineries, and even a spot of spring cleaning for the game's server itself. After all, *Eve*'s universe is now nine years old, and as such could do with a quick wipe around the edges of the persistent server that houses its virtual world. To this end, remnants of ancient code are being hunted and cleared away, while responsibility for various tertiary aspects of the world are being ported to a second server, improving capacity all round.

As ever with CCP's alcohol and excitement-fuelled fan presentations, there were also a host of theoretics, including the suggestion of adding the ability to mine the rings around the planets – potentially for in-game monetary rewards that have so far been non-existent – and even a hint that player avatars will now be able to leave their ships and explore derelicts.

While this last one could shift up the dynamic of *Eve* quite considerably, it's probably better simply to expect the sensible, high-level fixes that have been laid in stone, and simply take the others with a pinch of salt until *Inferno* beds in to *Eve*'s ecosystem.

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



David Lindsay

Lead designer/general manager – Mechanist Games

Independent developer Mechanist Games is working on browser-based, Unity-powered MMO City Of Steam, which is about to enter the alpha testing phase. The Steampunk-inspired title marks the debut release for the team



Which business model makes most sense for MMOs in 2012 – free-to-play or subscription?
Free-to-play makes the most sense for us. We're new to the scene, just making a name for ourselves, and want to get as many people to try *City Of Steam* as we can. We have a game that is an unimaginably small download for what it is and plays right in the browser with the minimal requirement of having the Unity webplayer installed. If we went with full-on subscriptions we'd be adding that barrier of entry, and this could defeat the purpose of having such an accessible game.

I do think that subscription-based business models still have a place in 2012, but the free-to-play scene is a vast one and is allowing less-known developers a chance to make it big.

How important is console support for MMO success these days?
At the moment I think everyone is waiting to see what the next generation of consoles will look like and how they will perform. There are fears that it won't be as large a jump as it has been in the past, so perhaps support isn't on everyone's cards these days. Making a game that is multi-platform is still in the best interest for developers, though. The ability to publish Unity 3D on a wide variety of platforms with much less development time does provide us with the chance to consider console support in the future, but for the moment we have no plans.

Who do you currently consider to be your biggest competitor?
This comes as a hard question for us, because *City Of Steam* packs a big punch for a browser-based game. The features it will include at launch and its graphics will set it far apart from most on the market. We are trying to redefine web-gaming, and prove that browser-based games can deliver a similar user experience as some huge-install client-based games. So do we look to just the web browser, or also client-based games? If you compare *City Of Steam* to *Runescape* and *Drakensang*, we distinguish ourselves in graphics, sound, gameplay and fiction. The only thing holding us back is our youth, and the small but growing size of our community. Luckily our loyal and awesome fanbase gives us a great foundation.

> The only thing holding us back is our youth, and the small but growing size of our community. Our awesome fanbase gives us a great foundation

What's the biggest challenge facing your business right now?
Our biggest challenge has to be getting *City Of Steam* off the ground, out there and giving it the exposure it deserves. Mechanist Games? I'm sure no-one has heard of us, but we want to make a name for ourselves and demonstrate our perspective on the MMO scene. We are new and we will openly admit that, so we love to get input from our fan-base to improve *City Of Steam* so that, in the end, we launch a game that is well received.

How do you see MMOs evolving throughout the next ten years?
I think we're all getting tired of the typical fantasy MMO titles available, so there will definitely be a transition to other less explored genres to excite and reinvent the scene. We'll also probably see an increase in interactivity from different devices providing increased support for the core MMO game. That is to say, more companion apps for the iPhone/Android, as well as other portable devices that will expand the medium and scale of the game.

For more information on City Of Steam and Mechanist Games, see www.mechanist.com





City Of Steam is an ambitious browser-based MMO, which looks slicker than most thanks to the versatile Unity Engine.

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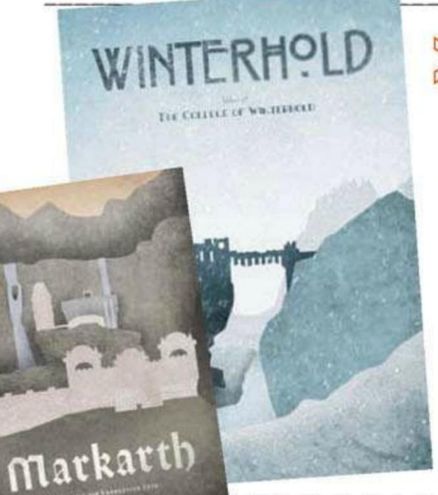
■ Amazon.co.uk
■ Price: £49.99

>> It may price itself out of the market for most casual gamers, but this Bluetooth game controller for Android (or a limited number of iOS titles) completely sidesteps the issues associated with touch-based controls, and is therefore probably an essential purchase for anyone who spends a lot of time retroing it up on their smartphone. And considering the increasing popularity of the Android format, it'll only become more so in the future. With a sturdy D-pad and six buttons (including two shoulder buttons), it's charged using USB and good for about nine hours on a full battery.

>> Alice: Madness Returns Toys

■ Forbiddenplanet.com ■ £17.99 each

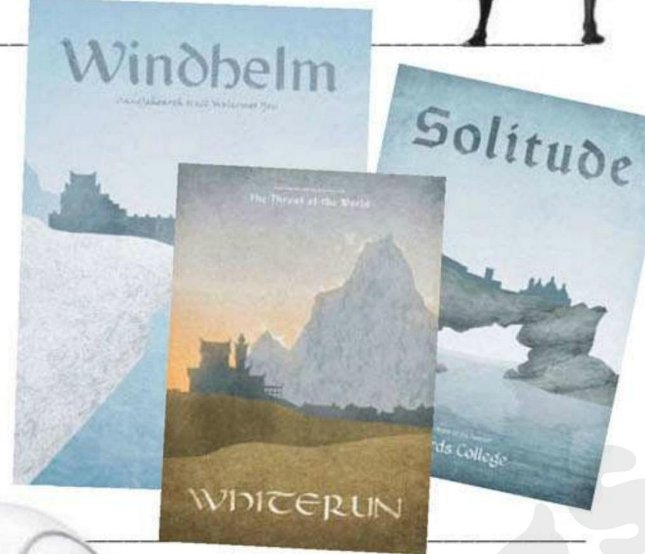
>> Spicy Horse's return to Lewis Carroll's world may not have set the world of videogames on fire, but it's impossible to dismiss the degree of imagination it brought to the first hour or so of each of its levels (before each one outstayed its welcome). And with character design standing as the game's biggest asset, it makes sense that Diamond Select would want to market toys based on some of American McGee's designs. Pick of the bunch? Definitely the Cheshire Cat, who is perfect apart from his feeble-looking articulated knees, and the Hysteria mode Alice, which is impossible to look at without hearing a woman's scream. Top Stuff.



>> Skyrim Tourism Posters

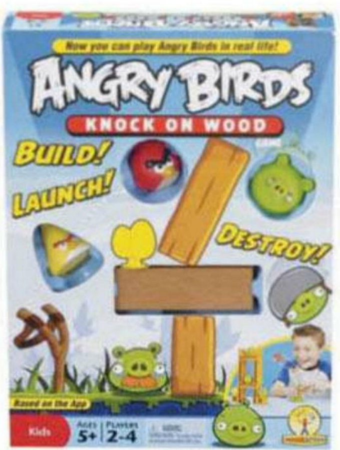
■ Gameprint.co.uk
■ Price: £12 each, £37.50 for all five

>> Dean Walton's beautiful limited-edition run of Dragonborn Destination one-sheets perfectly recapture the character and stark beauty of some of Skyrim's most memorable locations. Not only would we gladly display all of these posters on our walls, but we'd eagerly take the trip advertised on each of them. Apart from the Throat of the World, that is – too many massive beasts, too many steps, and too damn cold.



>> Angry Birds: Knock On Wood

■ Firebox.com
■ Price: £19.99



>> Have you ever become frustrated by the way *Angry Birds* never does the same thing twice, thereby making it as much a test of luck as it is judgment, and impossible to master in any quantifiable way? Yeah. Well, the good thing about this physicalised version of the world's most depressingly popular casual download game is that, being real, it actually has to conform to the laws of physics, meaning you can get better at it the more you play rather than just killing time between your current age and an unfulfilled death. Oh, and it reminds us of *Crossbows & Catapults*, so it must be awesome.

>> Portal 2 Plush Turret With Sound

■ Thinkgeek.com ■ Price: $34.99

>> It's with much regret that we've been forced to give up on our dreams of one day waking to find ourselves in the *Portal* universe. But on the plus side, it gives us more time to devote to collecting Thinkgeek's incredible range of merch based on Valve's finest physics puzzler. This plush not only detects movement and responds with one of five familiar game soundbites, but also reacts to being knocked over or ignored for too long. If you can afford the shipping, you can probably also afford to stock up on AAA batteries you'll rinse through because you can't stop playing with it.

STANDING ON THE CLIFF, THE ANSWERS SEEM TO ESCAPE HIM. HE ONLY KNOWS THAT HE'LL FIND THEM IN GAMES™ ISSUE CXXIII

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